

Eric Walters

HOUSTON, IS THERE A PROBLEM?

A
Teen Astronauts
novel



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A Problem?**

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Eric Walters

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To those who are willing to boldly go where no one has gone before.



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One

"I'm home," I called out as I came into the house and dropped my backpack on the floor.

"Houston! Houston!" the twins yelled as they came barreling out of the kitchen and threw themselves into me with such power that they almost knocked me over. They were only four, but they were getting big.

I picked up Brett and threw him into the air and onto the couch, and he shrieked.

"Me now, me now!" Dylan screamed. I did the same thing with him.

I rushed over and started tickling both of them.

"Stop! Stop!" Dylan yelled.

"You're gonna make me pee!" Brett yelled as he rolled off the couch.

"Boys! Boys! Boys!" Suzie called out as she came into the room. "You need to go and finish your dinner."

"Mooommm," they both whined.

It wasn't unusual for them to talk in one voice. I'd read that twins, especially identical twins, often did that. "Go, *now*, or there's no dessert for either of you," she said. "I'll give it all to Houston."

They scrambled to their feet and disappeared into the kitchen.

Suzie was their mother and my aunt. My mother's younger sister. But she and her husband had been my guardians for the past three years. Since my parents were killed. The boys were just babies when I moved in and had never known me not living here. To them I was more like a brother than a cousin. And Suzie was more than my aunt, but she would never be my mother.

"You're a little later than I thought you were going to be," Suzie said.

"I told you we were getting together at Jen's to celebrate the end of the school year."

"You didn't tell me it was going to be this late."

"I guess I lost track of time. Sorry," I said.

"You know I worry."

She did worry, and I really should have called. It was just that I was pretty well the only person in my grade who didn't have a cell phone, and it was embarrassing to always borrow one. Cell phones cost money, and we didn't have much of that.

Besides, it was definitely "uncool" to have to call home. I'd worked hard all year to be seen as cool – well, at least not "uncool" – and I didn't want to lose my hard-earned status.

"Everybody must have been pretty happy about the start of summer vacation," she said.

"For sure." Although most were more excited than me. "It was pretty emotional saying our goodbyes."

"Goodbyes? Aren't you going to be seeing each other over the summer?"

"Dwayne's family is moving, and some are gone for most of the summer, and then

we're not all heading to the same high school next year."

"That's right! End of eighth grade and start of high school. Big difference."

It was going to be different. It was hard enough moving here and having to make all new friends in fifth grade and I'd have to try to do it all again. I wasn't looking forward to it.

"Let's have it," she said.

"Have what?" I asked, playing dumb.

"Give me your report card or you're not having dessert either."

I reached into my backpack, pulled it out and handed it to her.

"Is it just good or really good?" she asked.

"I guess you'll be the judge of that."

She pulled the report out of the envelope and unfolded it.

"Wow...six A's...and three A-pluses." She then shrugged. "Average."

"Average?"

"Average for you, and spectacular for anybody else."

"So, does that mean I do or don't get dessert?"

"Dessert and this." She put an arm around me and gave me a big hug. It felt good, although I was getting too old for hugs from my aunt, and my arms hung limply at my side.

"Your mother would be proud of you," she said. Her voice was just a whisper.

I felt my body stiffen. I was surprised she'd mentioned her. My mother—her sister—wasn't someone we talked much about.

"And I guess your father would be too," she added. "It's just those were the sort of marks your mother always got. We all knew she was so special that she could have become anything if...well...you know."

I did know. If my father hadn't come along. If she hadn't gotten pregnant when she was in high school and had gone on to college instead, like she was supposed to. If I hadn't come along.

"Not that your mother ever felt bad about not going further. You know that, right?"

"I know."

I also knew it had changed her life. And I guess, eventually, ended it. If she'd gone down another path, she—both of my parents—never would have been killed in that car accident.

Snap out of it, I ordered myself. I couldn't overthink it. That was always the danger. I overthought some things. Actually, I overthought almost *everything*. Why couldn't I just go with the flow, like my aunt and uncle? And, really, like almost everybody else in the world.

"Do you know how hard it was to have a big sister who was that smart?" Suzie asked. "It always felt like teachers didn't think I was really trying."

It probably would have been hard, but it wasn't so easy being the smartest either. I knew some of my friends—even my close friends—sometimes didn't seem pleased that I did so well. I think some of them would even have celebrated if I were to blow a test. Maybe I'd have to explore that theory in September. No, not right away. It was a new school with new teachers, and I needed the teachers to know I was smart. Being the smart

kid was about the only thing I had. The difficult part was letting the teachers know you're smart without letting the other students know that you're *too* smart.

"I'm glad there are nine years between you and the twins, so nobody will be comparing them to you," Suzie said.

"And it's not like we even have the same last name," I added.

"Of course, you know that at any time you're welcome to use our last name."

"I know." Although I was never going to do that. My last name was all that was left of my parents. My father was an only child. His parents were gone. I carried on his name. Besides, being Houston Williams sounded a lot better than having my aunt's married name and being called Houston Honey. That sounded like a cartoon character or the name of an all-female country band from Texas.

"Come on. I kept a plate warm for you and for Brad. He isn't home yet either."

Brad hardly ever made it home for supper. Especially at this time of year. He ran his own business building decks and landscaping, so during the spring, summer and fall he worked really long hours. The twins were often still in bed when he left in the morning and asleep when he got home. He'd arrive dirty, tired and hungry and plop himself in front of the TV to have dinner. I liked Brad, and I knew he liked me, but we didn't talk that much. He didn't talk much to anybody. He wasn't much of a talker.

I sat down at my place at the table. I liked that I had a specific place to sit. I had one twin on each side. They were just finishing up their food as Suzie put down the meal in front of me. Fish sticks and french fries. I liked fish sticks and french fries.

"Be careful—the plate is hot," she said.

"Thanks."

Suzie wasn't much of a cook, but she was a good mother. I often "heard" my mother when she was talking to the boys. She and my mother had the same voice, used the same phrases and had the same kindness. That made me happy and sad all at once.

The twins were just as much of a surprise to her and Brad as I had been to my mother. She and Brad had been together since she was in tenth grade and he was in twelfth. It was just after she graduated from high school that she got pregnant and they got married.

Brett reached out and took a french fry from my plate. I grabbed a couple more and put them on his plate and then did the same for Dylan. They both gave me a smile. They were good kids. They could be annoying, but I really liked them. Well, really, I loved them. They were my family. At least what was left of my family.

"It sounds like some of your friends are going away for the summer," Suzie said. "Are they doing anything special?"

"Jenny and Devon are going away to camp for a month. Scott and his family are going to Europe. Tasha's family has a lake house, and she's going to be spending the summer there. Farley's grandparents are taking him to Disney World for two weeks."

"They say Disney World is the happiest place on the planet," she said.

"At least in the commercials."

"Brad and I are going to take you all to Disney World someday. It's just that summer is too busy for him to take time off."

"I understand. Someday."

I wasn't going away, but I was going to be busy. I was going to spend the summer working with Brad, doing some of the grunt work, like cutting grass and moving dirt and lumber.

"You're not going away but you know you don't have to work with Brad if you don't want to," Suzie said.

"I want to work with him. I like helping. He's going to pay me, and besides, what else am I going to do?"

"Hang out with friends, play video games or do nothing," she said.

"I'm still going to do a lot of that."

Besides, I felt like I *should* be helping. Suzie and Brad were good to me. They never said anything, but I knew money was tight. Anything that *was* for me *wasn't* for the twins. I took a couple more fries from my plate and put them on the twins' plates.

"Oh, I forgot, you got mail today," Suzie said.

"I got mail? From who?"

She got up and returned, placing an envelope in front of me.

It was fairly fancy-looking. There was my full name, and in the corner was a large logo that said *Futures Space Camp*, and there were pictures of space vehicles and kids in space suits strewn across the front.

"It looks like some sort of advertising," Suzie said.

"Yeah, it's for a space camp."

"Space camp?"

"There are four or five scattered around the country. I've checked some of them out online. Some are even attached to actual NASA facilities."

"NASA. The organization that actually sends people to space?"

"The same."

"And these camps send people to space?"

I laughed. "I wish. They're for people to learn about space travel and even go through some of the same training astronauts go through."

"That sounds pretty exciting."

"It would be," I agreed.

"You read a lot about space. It really interests you, right?" I nodded. I knew so much about space. I'd studied it from before I went to school. I knew all about the planets, the solar system, theories about black holes and the Big Bang and about every space mission that had ever taken place. Not to mention I could practically recite every line from *Star Trek* and the *good Star Wars* movies.

"Sure, but doesn't space interest everybody?" I asked.

"I could see how it would be restful to get away from the twins and spend some time in space."

I laughed. The twins didn't seem to notice.

"Do you ever think about being an astronaut?" she asked.

"Nobody becomes an astronaut unless they have graduate degrees, and they're doctors or physicists or at least a pilot, like in the military."

"You could enlist in the air force and become a pilot. And with your marks, you're going to be offered scholarships for college, just like your mother was."

I'd never thought about her getting scholarship offers, but it didn't surprise me.

"Mommy, can we have dessert now?" Dylan asked.

"You have a little more on your plate."

"I'm finished," Brett said. He picked up his empty plate and licked it a couple of times to prove his point.

Brett was hilarious even when he didn't mean to be.

I turned the envelope over in my hands. More pictures of people hanging around rockets, and kids in blue jumpsuits sitting inside the thrusters of a gigantic rocket. I recognized it as the *Saturn V*. Standing upright, it would have been as tall as a thirty-six-story building. Those were the rockets that took the *Apollo* missions to the moon. I'd seen pictures and videos of liftoffs. How amazing would it have been to be at Cape Canaveral to see that in person? Forget Disney World—the Kennedy Space Center was where I'd go on vacation if I could. I'd read that when the rockets took off, the ground shook, and during night launches, the whole sky became so bright it was almost like daytime. To be there for a launch would be amazing. To be strapped inside that rocket was beyond anything I could even imagine.

"You mentioned you'd been checking on space-camp websites, so maybe that's why you got something mailed to you."

"It could be, but I didn't go to the website of this camp."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm 100 percent positive."

"I know I should believe you. You're like my sister with that photographic memory."

"I don't have a photographic memory. That's when people have the ability to recall images from memory after a few exposures—some people call it eidetic memory. I don't have that—almost nobody does." What I had was an exceptional memory. Words, phrases, images and ideas seemed to lodge in my brain much faster than with other people.

She laughed. "You sound so much like her."

"And even if I did go on their website, how would they get my home address?" I asked.

"I'm positive that Google listens in to phone calls and monitors our computers, so they could easily figure that out," Suzie said.

"It doesn't matter. They wasted a stamp on me, because there's no way I could afford to go there. I'll throw it out."

I went to get up.

"Wait!" Suzie yelled. "You can't throw it out without opening it first."

"Why not?"

"It's like letting a phone just ring. You have to open the envelope."

"You can go ahead." I handed it to her.

She ripped it open. "Fancy paper," she said as she pulled something out.

I popped another fish stick into my mouth.

"Oh my goodness," Suzie said.

I looked up. Her eyes were wide open. "What?"

"Houston, you won."

"Won what?"

"A two-week stay at space camp."

Two

Brad and I sat looking at his laptop. On the screen was the website for Futures Space Camp. On the table beside the computer was the invitation I'd received and Brad's cell phone.

The twins' bedroom door opened and Suzie slipped out, silently closing the door behind her. She came over to us.

"Are the Boo-Boos asleep?" Brad asked.

"They're asleep, and please don't call them the Boo-Boos."

"I'm just joking, they can't hear me, and besides it wasn't like we planned them," Brad said.

"You don't plan your blessings. You just accept them when they arrive," she said.

"They are blessings—loud blessings."

She reached down and gave Brad a little squeeze and a kiss on the top of his head.

I remember when my parents used to do things like that.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"It's pretty impressive," Brad said.

He scrolled onto another page showing pictures of kids—most my age or older—doing different activities.

"That's a simulator of the *Orion* capsule," I said, pointing at a picture. "That's the next-generation spaceship that will take people to Mars."

"And they have a pool at the camp too," added Suzie, pointing at the screen. "That's exciting that you can also swim."

"They're probably using it for neutral buoyancy training," I suggested.

They both looked at me. Obviously neither knew what I was talking about.

"To train astronauts to deal with zero gravity, they spend time underwater. It's the best approximation of floating in space."

"And this camp looks legitimate?" Suzie asked.

"I think so," Brad said. "Do you know what's the really impressive part?" Before Suzie could answer, he pointed at the fees.

She whistled. "That is a whole lot of money. Apparently, it's not just going to space that's expensive, but even just going to space camp. They're offering Houston a full scholarship though, right?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I'm not completely sure, but I think maybe."

"*Maybe* isn't good enough. I'm still afraid it could be some sort of marketing thing. You know, pay for one week and get one week free," Suzie said.

"If it were that, we could only afford for Houston to stay for about three hours."

"Where is it?"

“Texas,” I said.

“And it says in the letter that transportation is provided to and from the camp,” Brad added.

“It all just seems too good to be true,” Suzie said.

“Do you think one of your teachers could have nominated you for the scholarship?” Brad asked me.

I shrugged. “I think some of my teachers would be happy if I left the state or even the planet.”

“I’m sure some are grateful enough that you’re just leaving the school,” Brad said.

“But you’ve been working on that, right?” Suzie asked.

I nodded. I had been working on that. Some teachers really didn’t like when you were smarter than them, and liked it even less when you let them know it. That was the part I’d been working on. Along with trying not to make other students feel foolish because I was smart.

“But a teacher sending in my name for this camp is the only thing I can think of,” I said.

“It sounds like something Mr. Johnston would do,” Suzie suggested.

Mr. Johnston was my science teacher. Everybody joked that I was his favorite student. He was certainly my favorite teacher. He was smart and funny and always encouraged me and he loved talking about stuff—particularly space stuff. It had to be him.

“But why wouldn’t he have told you he was doing it?” Brad asked.

“He might have thought it was such a long shot that he didn’t want Houston to get his hopes up,” she said.

“And now, with summer vacation, there’s no way to check with Mr. Johnston or anybody at your school,” Brad added.

“It would be nice if we could talk to somebody,” Suzie said.

“Brad and I sent the camp an email,” I said.

“You did?”

“Yes, but there’s no reply yet. Here’s the contact information. Address, email and phone number.”

“Phone number? Why don’t we call the camp?” Suzie asked.

“It’s almost eight at night,” Brad said.

“It’s a camp. Don’t people live there all the time?”

Suzie picked up her phone and dialed. She put it on speaker. It started to ring. One... two...three...four.

“Good evening, Futures Space Camp,” a woman answered.

“Good evening,” Suzie said. “I’m calling to speak to... um...speak to whoever is in charge.”

“That would be Colonel Sanderson.”

“Yes, I’d like to speak to Colonel Saunders.”

“Sanderson,” I hissed.

“Sorry, I meant to say Colonel Sanderson,” Suzie said. “I knew I wasn’t ordering a bucket of chicken.”

The woman chuckled. “No need to apologize. Can I tell him who’s calling?”

“He’s there?”

“He often works late,” the woman said.

“My name is Suzie, um, *Suzanne* Honey, but I’m calling regarding my nephew, Houston Williams.”

“Is he one of our campers?”

“We received an invitation for him to attend.”

“Oh, he must be one of the scholarship recipients.”

“So you *do* offer scholarships?” Suzie asked. “Full scholarships?”

“All our special-invitation attendees are on full scholarship. Let me put you through to the colonel.”

The phone went silent. We exchanged questioning looks.

“Good evening, this is Colonel Sanderson.”

Suzie looked at Brad, who looked at her. Nobody spoke.

“Hello...sir,” I stammered. “This is Houston Williams.”

“From Wisconsin,” he said.

“Yes—you *know* me?”

“I know all our scholarship recipients. How can I help?”

“Um, I guess we wanted to just...um...” I didn’t know how to say it.

“Make sure this was legitimate?” Colonel Sanderson asked.

“Exactly,” Suzie said.

“I understand completely. And who else do I have on the phone?” he asked.

“Houston, of course, and his aunt Suzie and uncle Brad. We’re his guardians.”

“I’m pleased to meet you. Now, you ask questions and I’ll provide answers.”

“Okay, tell me about your camp,” Suzie asked.

“We provide young people with the opportunity for exciting experiences related to space, as well as what is the closest approximation to the training that real astronauts undergo.”

“That sounds exciting,” Suzie said.

“And your camp is new, right?” I asked.

“While the planning has been going on for years, this is our first year of operation. We are accredited by the National Academy of Sciences and have a formal affiliation with NASA. We provide scholarships for deserving candidates.”

“Houston is definitely worthy.”

“And definitely couldn’t attend without a scholarship,” Brad added.

That was so true it didn’t even hurt. There was no way we could ever afford this. Not Brad and Suzie or my parents either.

“How did you find out about Houston?” Suzie asked.

“Most often our scholarship candidates are referred by their teachers.”

“Can you tell us which of his teachers did that?” Suzie asked.

"It's confidential, but the teacher is free to let that be known if they choose."

"We were thinking his homeroom and science teacher, Mr. Johnston," Suzie said.

"Often it is science or math teachers who make the referrals. I'm assuming you must be very good in science," the colonel said.

"He's very good in *everything*," Suzie replied. "He's the smartest student in his whole school."

"We only extend our scholarship invitations to the best and the brightest."

"That's Houston."

"Now if you have any further doubts, we encourage parents and guardians to bring the candidate to our facility and attend the orientation on that first day and meet staff."

Suzie and Brad exchanged a look. I knew they didn't have the money—or time—to take the flight down with me.

"That won't be necessary," I said, saving them the embarrassment of saying this.

"May I assume you're going to accept our invitation and attend the program?"

"I'll be there."

"Excellent. I can assure you that the experience you will receive is very close to what I received before being in space."

"You were in space?" Brad said.

"A few times."

"Wait...are you Sandpaper Sanderson?" I asked.

He laughed. "I don't get called that much anymore, but yes I am."

"You know him?" Suzie asked me.

"He's famous."

"I think that's pushing it a bit," Colonel Sanderson said. "I'm surprised you know me."

"You're going to find out that Houston knows a lot of things," Suzie said.

"Someone from the camp will contact you in the next few days to make travel arrangements. Please feel free to call back if there are any concerns or questions and, Houston, I'll see you at registration."

"We really appreciate this," Suzie said. "Thank you and good night."

She pushed the button to end the call.

"I was surprised you knew him," Brad said.

"I'm never surprised when Houston knows anything," Suzie added.

"He is one of the best known astronauts in history."

"Wow, and I was talking to him. That's so amazing," Suzie said. "I can't even imagine what it would be like to be an astronaut."

"I think it would be out of this world," Brad said.

She shook her head. "That is such a dad joke. You're lucky you're cute."

"It's one of my strengths."

"Then it's settled. You're going to space camp," Suzie said to me.

"I guess. It's just that I promised Brad I'd help him with the business and—"

"You can help me when you get back," Brad said.

“He’s right,” Suzie said.

I nodded my head and started to feel the excitement swelling inside. “I’m going to space camp!”

Three

The flight attendant sat down beside me. “How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Better. Better now.”

“That was a lot of turbulence.”

This was my first time on a plane, and it had started okay. Then we’d hit the bumps. I’d thought I’d be all right, sort of like on a roller coaster. But I really didn’t like roller coasters very much either. I’d closed my eyes and tried not to think about it. Then my stomach started taking over. The plane dropped and my stomach rose up into my throat, and I knew breakfast was coming back up. Why had I eaten pancakes for breakfast? I’d scrambled to pull out the airsickness bag and luckily got most of it into the bag.

“I brought you this.” She handed me a warm, wet towel.

“Thanks.” I used it to wipe my face. It smelled like lemons.

“Don’t be embarrassed. It happens to all of us sometimes,” she said.

“You’ve been airsick?”

“Lots of times.” She leaned in close. “Don’t let on,” she whispered, “but one of the other flight attendants got sick during this flight.”

“Really?”

She nodded. “He’s right there,” she said, pointing up the aisle.

I rose slightly and angled my head so I could see farther. I spotted him.

“Former college football player, father of three, a fitness nut, scuba diver and flies private planes.”

“And he got airsick?”

“Don’t tell him I told you.”

“Are you making this up to make me feel better?” I asked.

“Is it working?”

“A little.”

“Well, he didn’t get sick on this flight but everybody does. Besides, I’m sure this doesn’t happen to you every time you fly, right?”

“This is the first time I’ve ever been on a plane.”

She didn’t say anything, but her eyes said *really*? All my friends had been on planes on their holidays. I’d never been anywhere.

“Well, that explains it. You’ll be better the next time, and you’ll hardly ever have turbulence that’s this bad again.” She paused. “I was just wondering—how old are you?”

“Thirteen.”

“I thought you might be a bit older.”

“I get told that sometimes.”

“I’m assuming you have somebody waiting for you at the airport, right?”

“Yes.”

There would be somebody from the camp waiting for me at Arrivals.

“Good.” She got to her feet. “I better get back to work. Would you like something cold to drink? A soda, or a water?” “Water with lots of ice would be great. Thank you.”



The bags plopped down onto the belt conveyor and moved along the baggage-claim carousel. Crowded all around were the passengers on my flight, waiting for their stuff to appear. More and more people claimed their bags. So many people. So many bags. So many almost-identical bags, but nobody was going to confuse my bag with theirs.

My beaten-up lime-green bag fell onto the conveyor and moved toward me. There on the side were the initials WYSA—Wisconsin Youth Soccer Association. There was no doubt it was mine. I grabbed the bag and threw it over my shoulder—it didn’t weigh much—and exited through the Arrivals door. There was a crowd of people waiting for incoming passengers. Some were holding flowers. Others were holding signs. One read *We love you, Grampa* and was held by a little girl who wasn’t much bigger than the sign.

I was looking for the one that read *Futures Space Camp*. I scanned the line, looking for the sign. No luck. I headed into the crowd and kept my eyes open, but there was so much to see. So many people, so much noise, so much action. Maybe I’d just have to wait until the crowd thinned out a bit. Maybe my driver was late.

I walked along the entire line of people one more time. There were now less people, but nobody was waiting for me. I moved over to the side and leaned against the wall. I wondered if the driver was looking for me. Did he or she even know what I looked like? I suddenly felt very alone.

I slipped the bag off my shoulder and set it down on the floor. I pulled out my phone. Well, Brad’s phone. He’d let me borrow it. I also had seventeen dollars in my pocket. Brad had taken me to the airport and signed the papers to let me fly without an adult. He’d slipped me some money—I didn’t know how much until I got through security. He’d said, “That’s all I have with me...I wish it was more... just in case...a man should always have money in his pockets.” I felt much more like a boy right now.

Brad wasn’t my father, but he was a good guy. He always treated the twins pretty good. He was good to Suzie. He was good to me. He could have been resentful for having to take me, but he wasn’t. Of course, none of that stopped me from feeling guilty. The guy was working hard to support an extra kid he didn’t ask for.

I could phone my aunt, but what could she do except be worried? She was at the other end of the country. I could take a taxi. I had an address, although I wasn’t sure I had enough money to get me there.

Wait—I also had the camp phone number in my head! I’d just call and see if somebody was on the way or if somehow we’d just missed each other and the driver was waiting at a different gate.

I pushed the buttons to dial, and the phone started to ring. And ring and ring.

“Come on,” I mumbled under my breath. Staff had answered the phone late in the evening, so they certainly should answer it at ten in the morning on registration day. It kept ringing. Shouldn’t it at least go to voice mail? I was dialing the right phone number, wasn’t I?

I looked down at the phone. I’d dialed the number I remembered, and I remembered numbers. When I was little, a girl in my class had said she thought I’d “swallowed a calculator.” Numbers—and facts—stuck in the spongy part of my brain.

Finally, after the twenty-third ring, I decided there was no point and hung up.

Okay, what were my options now? I could wait, but for how much longer? I looked at the time. The camp orientation was scheduled to begin in less than two hours. I had to be there for that, so waiting longer didn't make sense. I could take a taxi—assuming I had enough money to do that.

There was one more choice. I could walk.

The day before, I'd googled the camp to see how far it was from the airport. I closed my eyes and visualized the map. I could see the names of the roads I'd have to travel. It wasn't far—about ten minutes by car.

I did the math in my head. If I walked at one-tenth of the speed of a car, then it would take about a hundred minutes—one hour and forty minutes—to walk. If I ran, it would take closer to sixty minutes. I could be there, running or walking, in time to register and attend the orientation. I'd just go on my own by foot. I liked taking care of myself. That was about all you could ever depend on.



I had divided distance by my speed per hour to calculate my travel time, but I hadn't factored in the temperature. Texas in June was beyond hot. My bag, slung over my shoulder, had gotten heavy, and I really needed something to drink. Finally, I reached the high walls that surrounded the camp, but I still hadn't reached the gate. I stayed close to the tall plaster-and-cement wall, trying to walk in the thin wedge of shade it was providing. Coming up to the gate, I could see a line of cars waiting to go inside.

I walked up and started to go in and—

“Excuse me!” a deep voice called out.

I turned. A large man in uniform, a gun strapped to his side, was walking toward me. People in the two closest cars were looking at me. Both cars were fancy and expensive—a BMW and a Mercedes.

“This is a private facility,” the guard said. “No trespassing allowed.”

“I'm not trespassing. This is Futures Space Camp, right?” I pointed at the big sign mounted on the wall.

“Yes,” the guard replied.

“I'm supposed to be here.”

“We need to see proof that you're an attendee.”

I dug into my bag, searching for the invite. I knew it was in there somewhere. I started pulling out clothes, a pair of shoes, dropping them to the pavement.

“Here it is,” I said, handing it to him.

He examined it, then looked up and gave me a smile. “Sorry about that.”

“That's okay, you were just doing your job.”

“You're here on a scholarship.”

“Yeah.” I didn't know if he thought that was a good thing.

“Most of the people who attend are rich,” the guard said as he motioned to the cars in the line. “They're here because their parents have deep pockets. You're here because you're smart. By the way, I'm Stan.”

“Houston.”

“Yeah, I know from the invitation. No parents with you?”

"My family put me on a plane. They're back in Wisconsin."

"Wisconsin? That must make you a cheesehead."

"I think it's illegal not to cheer for the Packers if you're from Wisconsin."

He turned back toward the guard station. "Hey, Jake! We got ourselves a Packers fan here!"

Another guard straightened and looked in our direction. I assumed he was Jake. He'd been talking to the driver of a car. He looked at his friend and then at me and put both thumbs down. "Go, Bears, go!"

"Do you think I should let him in?" Stan yelled at his partner.

"Why not? Anybody who cheers for the Packers deserves to be blasted into space!"

"Maybe, but do you think anybody who cheers for the Bears should be allowed to carry a gun?" I yelled back.

Stan burst into laughter. Jake straightened up further, then left the line of cars behind and started in my direction. He seemed to get bigger as he got closer, and he didn't look happy. In fact, he looked scary. Uniform, big black boots and his gun flapping on his hip as he walked. I had to fight the urge to run or at least hide behind Stan. Jake stopped right in front of me. Stan was big, but Jake was bigger. He raised his hand and—

"Give me a high five," he said.

I reached up, and we slapped palms. "At least you I can respect. You know who he likes?" he said, pointing at Stan. "The Jets. What sort of bozo cheers for the Jets?"

"Only the mothers of the guys who play for them," I suggested.

"Nobody else," Jake said. "Give me five down low."

We slapped hands again.

"You and your big, bad, bruising teams," Stan said.

"Better than some latte-drinking, sushi-eating, East Coast team from New York," Jake said.

"It could be worse. He could be a 49ers fan," I said.

"You know it, little brother," Jake added.

"Are you two finished?" Stan asked.

"Not as finished as the Jets," Jake said.

Stan raised his hands in surrender.

The car waiting first in line at the gate honked its horn.

"We better get back," Stan said. "Do you know where you're going?"

"The Welcome Center." I pictured the map of the camp in my head. I could see it as clear as I could the map that got me here. "It's straight ahead and off to the right."

"Just past the pool building."

"Exactly. See you around, Houston." They started to walk away and Stan stopped.

"You have any problems, you let us know. We practically run the place."

Four

Cars were parked along the circular driveway leading up to the Welcome Center. I'd never seen so many expensive cars in one place. There were still people milling about, but most had gone into the hall. The orientation was supposed to start in less than thirty minutes. Those that were still outside were huddled together in small clusters. Was I the only one on my own?

I thought about Suzie and Brad not being here—and my parents not being anywhere. I suddenly felt so alone. I knew my parents would have been proud of me—especially my mother. My dad was a great guy, but this place, this stuff, was the sort of thing my mother and I had shared. She thought space was as interesting as I did.

When I was just a little kid—under three—they'd hung up a solar system in my bedroom. Everything was proportionally sized—well, except the sun, because if the Earth was the size of an apple, the sun would have had to be twenty-seven feet high. I don't remember that far back, but they told me I was the only three-year-old who not only knew all the planets but also each one's size, composition and rotation time around the sun.

Tires squealed, and I turned around. A really big Lincoln Navigator was at the curb. It came to a stop, blocking in and towering over a Bentley. I knew the Bentley was worth more money, but the Navigator had attitude. The doors opened and a girl about my age, her parents and two younger kids, both girls, maybe seven and nine, got out. They were Asian. My friend Jimmy Kim was Korean—well, second-generation born-in-America Korean.

The girl was in jeans and a T-shirt, but the rest of them were dressed much fancier. The father was in a suit, the mother, a long flowing dress and a hat. The two younger girls were in dresses matching their mother's.

The rear lift gate of the Navigator opened, and the father took out three bags. They were bright and shiny and expensive and were the farthest thing from my lime-green bag.

The girl went to the back, and she and her father began arguing—not that I could hear them, but I could tell by the animated gestures. She wasn't happy about something.

The man circled around, got back into the vehicle and drove away, leaving his family behind. I assumed he was parking it. The girl and her mother and sisters started walking toward the building—toward me—and I realized I was standing there and staring right at them. I quickly turned and headed through the doors myself.

I surveyed the scene. Lots of people—families—milling around. There was a long table covered by a white tablecloth, with four people sitting behind it. Above them was a big sign that read *Registration*. A few people—kids with parents attached—were waiting in front of each person. I settled at the back of a line to wait my turn. The girl and her family joined the line beside me. The mother was talking, the two sisters were poking at each other, and the girl was working hard at ignoring it all, but she certainly didn't look happy.

I shuffled forward as the next person was processed. Everyone was being given ID on a lanyard to put around their neck and a white plastic bag filled with things they'd need. I listened in on the questions being asked. The person ahead of me finished and it was going to be my—

“Next!” the woman behind the table called out.

"Houston Williams. My address is 16 Hepburn Avenue, Brookfield, Wisconsin. My emergency contact is Suzanne Honey, and her phone number is—"

"Slow down, slow down! You can talk faster than I can write."

"Sorry."

"Did I overhear you say you're Houston Williams?"

I turned around. There was a large older man with a square jaw and a brush cut. He looked familiar...wait.

"Yes, sir—Colonel Sanderson," I said.

"How did you know it was me?"

"I recognized your voice from the phone call."

"Good ear." He reached out his hand, and we shook.

"Bonnie," he said to the woman behind the desk, "you'll find all of his information already on file."

"I've got it right here," she said. She pulled out an ID with my name on it and handed me a white plastic bag.

"And is this all of your luggage?" Colonel Sanderson asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Bonnie, can you please take his bag, and I'll bring Houston into the conference room."

I took the bag off my shoulder and handed it across the table. Bonnie gave me a welcoming smile. The colonel had already started walking away. I hurried and fell in beside him.

"I trust you had no problem getting here," Colonel Sanderson said.

"The flight was good."

"It's unfortunate that your parents were not able to come for orientation."

"They couldn't get the time off," I said. *And there was no money for flights.*

"I believe you're the only person who came unaccompanied. I think you should sit beside me during orientation."

"I thought you'd be giving the orientation."

"We have a whole faculty to do that." He held the door and motioned for me to enter. The room was big, with about three hundred comfortable-looking red seats, a stage bathed in light up front and a table and five chairs front and center. The colonel took a seat in a far corner of the room. It seemed like a strange place to sit.

"Did you have any difficulty finding your driver at the airport?" he asked.

"There was no driver."

"What?"

"There was no driver waiting for me."

"You should have called," he said.

"I did, and nobody answered."

"You must have dialed the wrong number."

I shook my head. "It was the right number. I remember numbers. Nobody answered the phone."

"That is unfortunate. We'll reimburse you for the taxi fare."

"I didn't take a taxi. I walked."

"From the airport?"

"It wasn't that far, and I like to walk." I didn't mention not having enough money for a cab.

"Perhaps you sent the wrong flight information, and that's why nobody was there."

"I sent the right information."

"How can you be so certain?" he asked.

"Because it involves numbers, and I don't get numbers wrong."

"Never?" he asked.

"Never. You can check the email we sent. You can check my phone to see what number I called if you don't believe me." I knew that sounded arrogant, and sounding arrogant sometimes got me in trouble, but I didn't care.

"Good afternoon, and welcome! Let's get started!" a voice called out from the stage before the colonel could respond. That was probably better.

The room became completely silent. I did a quick check—there were more than 150 people. They were all clustered in the front rows. We were the only ones sitting in the back.

"Welcome to Futures Space Camp," the man began. "I'm the director, and my name is Dr. Phillips."

"Was he an astronaut?" I whispered to the colonel.

"Mission Control. Former navy surgeon."

Dr. Phillips then said basically the same thing about himself. He introduced the other four people on the stage with him. The first person was Dr. Jones, and she told us she was an astrophysicist. The second person, Dr. Sanchez, was an aerospace engineer. The third was a biologist and former astronaut. Her name was Dr. Remmy. Her name wasn't familiar to me, so maybe she hadn't ever been in space.

The person at the end of the table stood up. He was older, and he introduced himself as Colonel McNabb and explained that he was a retired air force colonel and in charge of flight simulation. I had the feeling we all should have saluted him.

Dr. Phillips then pointed out a number of associates who were sitting in the audience. He said they were involved with physical training, survival and mathematics. Two people were introduced as experts in scuba diving. Were we going to be scuba diving? The ocean wasn't far away. I'd never even dipped a toe into an ocean, but I had seen *Jaws* a dozen times. Dr. Phillips kept introducing more associates—it seemed like there were almost as many people teaching at the camp as there were kids taking part in it. No wonder this camp cost a fortune to attend.

I looked around at the people in the other seats. Were any of them on a scholarship, or did they all have to pay? Judging from the cars outside this hall, they were all from rich families.

"Finally, there is one more introduction—our camp commander," Dr. Phillips announced. "Could we have a round of applause for Colonel Sanderson, who is sitting in the back corner."

Everybody spun their heads around to find him. He gave a little wave of his hand. They were all staring at him—and me.

"I'm sure you are aware that Colonel Sanderson is one of the most celebrated astronauts in the history of NASA. He has been in space on four different occasions,

including six months as commander of the International Space Station. He has piloted the shuttle twice and has spent more time in EVA than any other astronaut from any nation.”

EVA is short for extravehicular activity—basically, doing things outside the spacecraft. I didn’t think most of the audience knew what it meant. What they did understand was that it was impressive, and they started clapping again. Colonel Sanderson gave another little wave. He looked bored and almost annoyed by the attention. I was probably the only one close enough to notice.

“Along with John Glenn and Neil Armstrong, Colonel Steve Sanderson is one of the most important figures in the history of space travel, and we are so honored that he has agreed to become our camp commander. Colonel, would you like to say a few words at this time?”

“Hell, no,” Colonel Sanderson said under his breath so only I could hear.

He stood up. “It’s good to have you all here. I’m sure it will be a wonderful experience.”

He sat back down, and there was more applause.

He leaned toward me and whispered, “I don’t like public speaking. It scares me.”

“But you’ve been in space.”

“There’s no public speaking in space. It’s one of the things I like about it.”

Dr. Phillips threw the floor open for questions. One parent, and then another and another, asked things. He provided polite answers to what seemed to me like mostly silly questions.

Colonel Sanderson leaned closer to me. “Have you heard enough?”

“What?”

“I’m leaving. Do you want to come?” he asked.

“But...but...it’s not over.”

“It’s over for me. Stay if you want.”

He got up and made for the door. I scrambled to my feet as well. Most people had their eyes glued to the front and the speaker—but not all of them. The Asian girl was watching me, a sneer on her face. I walked out and closed the door softly behind me. The colonel was already up ahead, and I ran to join him.

“It feels strange to leave orientation.”

“At this point it wasn’t so much about answering questions for our participants as for the parents and guardians, and you don’t have any of those here.”

I didn’t. I also didn’t like him pointing it out.

“You must be the first camp participant who *walked* in through the front gate.”

“Walking wasn’t my idea,” I said.

“Are you sure you didn’t make a mistake when you gave us information?”

“I wasn’t the one who made the mistake.”

He stopped walking, turned and looked me square in the eyes. “Are you confident enough to risk your time here?” he asked.

“What?”

“If we go and check the emails, and it turns out you made the mistake, are you willing to go home?”

I wasn't expecting that. I really wanted to be here. I was right—*almost* completely 100 percent certain I was right. But not completely—99.9 percent certain.

"Well?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. "And what about you? If I'm right, will you apologize to me?"

"Do you think it was my job to pick you up?"

"No, but it was you who said you thought I was wrong, that it was my fault I had to walk here."

He stared at me. His expression hardened again. He was big. He was an astronaut—a *famous* astronaut. The commander of the place. His expression was unforgiving, and I had to fight not to look away. And then he smiled.

"I like you, kid. You got guts. I'm sorry for questioning you. I'm sorry you had to walk. I'm sorry nobody was there to pick you up and sorry that I implied it was your fault."

"You didn't imply. You said it straight out."

He laughed again. "Sorry that I said it was your fault. Is that good enough?"

"Yes...yes, sir."

"Good. Now do you have any questions you want answered?"

"Am I the only one here on a scholarship?"

"We often have scholarship participants."

"And with this group?" I asked.

"It's not just you. We would prefer you don't discuss your status with other participants. Any more questions?"

"Why are *you* here?"

"I'm the commander of the camp."

"But why is one of the most decorated astronauts in history running a kids' space camp?"

"The money is good."

"Really? Is that the real reason, that the money is good?" I asked.

"Do you know how old I am?"

"You'll be turning seventy-two on September 2nd."

"You did research on me?" he asked.

"Didn't you do research on me too?"

"You were well vetted or you wouldn't have been offered the opportunity to attend. Your research should have told you I'm considered by most to be *far* too old to go into space again."

"John Glenn was seventy-seven when he went up the last time."

"John Glenn was also the first man in space *and* a senator. He could do whatever he wanted. I don't play golf, I don't want to give speeches for service clubs, and I don't want to retire, so maybe being here is as close to space as I can get."

"You could have taken on other jobs at NASA."

"Here I have the opportunity to work with young people who might reach space someday," he said.

"Do you really think that somebody here at this camp might get to space?"

"Everybody begins someplace. Why not here? Isn't it your dream to be an astronaut?"

"I guess. You know—when I was little."

"But not now?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I know the odds are against it."

"I'm not talking odds. I'm talking dreams. Are you saying that if somebody offered you a chance to go to space, you'd say no?"

"I would have been happy if somebody had offered me a drive to get to space *camp*."

He chuckled. "Funny. Are you going to let that go?"

"This coming from a guy nicknamed Sandpaper because he wore people down."

He laughed, and all the tension was gone. "Look, maybe I should ask you the same question you just asked me. Why are *you* here?"

"It beats working as a landscaper with my uncle."

"And no other reason?" he asked.

"Sure. I want to learn. It's a chance to do something interesting. What can be more interesting than rockets and space?"

"Absolutely nothing. Unfortunately, my life now is mainly paperwork. I've got to go to my office and do some while you get started on your program. You should head to the pool."

"We're going for a swim?"

"Not a swim, an assignment. Your first challenge activity is in the pool." He offered me his hand. "Good to meet you, Houston."

"It was an honor to meet you, sir. I've never met a hero before."

"You know there's a fine line between heroic and stupid. Houston, I'm glad you're here."

"So am I."

"Let's hope we both feel the same way in two weeks."

He turned and walked away.

Five

We stood shivering on the pool deck, divided into nine teams of four. My team, besides me, consisted of a girl named Teal and two guys, Thomas and Devon. We were all the same age, going into ninth grade in the fall. The little I'd learned about the other camp participants was that all of them were going into either eighth or ninth grade come September.

It was cold on the pool deck, and nobody seemed too happy to be standing here in front of everyone else in nothing but a bathing suit. Both Thomas and Devon were on the thin side. I was no bodybuilder myself, but I was bigger than the two of them. Devon had thick glasses, and Thomas had a rather strange buzzed punk haircut.

Actually, one person did seem comfortable—Teal. She wasn't even shivering. She had blond hair and was, well, pretty. Very pretty. She was also wearing a gold necklace. There was a diamond locket on it. If it was a real diamond, it was worth a lot of money. I knew that much about jewelry.

Thomas had made a joke about her being named after a color, and she'd cut him down quick with a few words about how if he was a color he'd be called "bleached bone white" and a stare that would have peeled paint off a wall.

The instructor called us all to attention, and I stopped looking at Teal and turned in his direction as he introduced himself as Sergeant Miller. It seemed many of the instructors had a military background. He also had the haircut to go along with it.

"As you can see, each team has been given a collection of plastic tubes and metal clamps," he began.

The pile was in front of each group. The plastic tubes were three different colors.

"Your job is to assemble them into the figure you see on the screen behind me."

He clicked a little hand remote, and the big screen came to life. It showed a seven-sided shape constructed from the tubing.

"That doesn't look so hard," Thomas whispered.

I tried to ignore him. I stayed focused on the figure on the screen. It wasn't complicated, but it was precise.

"This is a competition. Not only are you building the structure, but your success is being judged against that of the other teams."

"What does the winning team get?" a girl asked.

"Nine points. The last team only gets one point."

"And if we can't get it finished the right way?" another boy asked.

"Then no points are assigned."

"Everybody should be able to finish this. It looks to be a fairly simple heptagon," the first girl added.

"Or it could also be called a septagon." The girl who said this was named Ashley Ling. "It derives its name because of the months of the year." Everybody just looked confused—she looked smug. I'd fix that.

"It's called that because *septum* is the Latin word for *seven* and the Roman calendar originally only had ten months. September was the seventh month, before the eighth, October. A septagon is the polygon before an octagon," I explained. "Seven sides instead of eight sides."

Sergeant Miller nodded. Some of the kids looked impressed. Ashley looked ticked off. Somehow that made it even better that I'd given the answer before her.

"You have sixty minutes to complete your task," Sergeant Miller said.

Everybody suddenly seemed to relax. A bunch of five-year-old children could do it in that time. The only test would be beating the other teams.

"It's so easy that you won't be needing this diagram to help you," the instructor said and turned off the screen.

That didn't seem to bother anybody. It certainly didn't bother me. I wondered if anybody else had noticed that there was a color pattern in the model diagram. I knew the red, green, blue pattern.

"Now, are there any questions?" Sergeant Miller asked.

"Yes. Why are we standing here by the pool in our bathing suits?" Ashley asked.

"Oh, I guess I forgot to mention that," the instructor said. "The winning team will be the first to have their shape assembled and attached to the bottom of the pool."

"The bottom? How deep is the pool?" somebody asked.

"The deep end is twenty feet, but don't worry—we're using the shallow end of the pool, which is only ten feet."

"But that's still deep," Thomas said. "Do we get equipment or something?"

"You can use flippers and masks."

"But why are we doing this?"

"Water is considered the closest approximation to the zero-gravity experienced in space," the instructor explained. "So, we use water to—"

"How do we get the structure to stay down there? Doesn't plastic float?" somebody else asked.

"There are metal clips at the bottom of the pool where the tubes can be secured. It's all very straightforward," Sergeant Miller explained.

Devon inched closer to me. "I don't swim a lot."

"Me neither," Thomas added. "You?"

"I can swim."

Everybody was now talking among themselves. There was tension and nervousness in the air along with the smell of the chlorine. I wondered if they'd ever had no group finish the task. Building that thing underwater would be incredibly difficult...or...wait.

I put up my hand. "Excuse me, sir. Could you give the instructions one more time?"

"Do we have to wait for the instructions to be said again, or can we just start assembling the structure?" Ashley asked.

This girl was really, really annoying. I turned to say something to her, but the instructor spoke before I could.

"We'll all start together after I repeat my instructions," he said. "You are to replicate the three-dimensional heptagon."

I loved how he used the word *heptagon* and emphasized it. I saw Ashley react ever so

slightly to his dig as he ignored her alternative name.

“And the first team to have their shape assembled and attached to the bottom of the pool is the winning team.” He held up a stopwatch. “And begin.”

People practically jumped into the air with the shock, and everybody seemed to be talking at once. Everybody except me. I bent down and started to gather all the pieces of tubing and clamps into my arms.

“What are you doing?” Thomas asked.

“Pick up the rest of the clamps and tools and come with me.”

With my arms full, I slowly started to walk to the far side of the pool, away from everybody else. My teammates gathered up the things I hadn’t and came right after me.

“We don’t have time for this!” Devon said. “We have to get building! Look—they’re already ahead of us!”

As if on cue, there was a big splash, followed by a second and a third and then a fourth, as members of the various teams jumped into the water. Others were running over to a big bin that held the flippers and masks.

“It’s okay. Just because they’re moving doesn’t mean they’re moving in the right direction.”

“How can down to the bottom not be the right direction?” Teal asked.

“Let me explain.”

Six

We sat off to the side of the pool, our shape coming to life in the middle of us.

"The next one needs to be red," I said as I handed a red piece of tube to Devon.

"I don't know about this," Thomas said.

"No, it's definitely red."

"I don't mean the color. I mean the way we're doing this."

"We're doing it the right way," I said.

"Even if we aren't, I'm happy not to go into the pool like everybody else," Devon said.

"We're going to go into the pool, but not just now, not yet," Teal said. "Devon, can you go get the fins and scuba masks so that when we're ready we can go in?"

"I'll go with him," Thomas said.

The two of them got up and went to get the equipment.

Teal moved a tube into place, wiggling it back and forth, trying to get it to snap into the clamp.

"This isn't easy," she said.

"It's a lot easier than if we were doing it at the bottom of the pool."

"I can see that. Nobody is doing very well."

The other teams were taking pieces to the bottom of the pool to assemble them. It looked like it was an eight-way race for last place. From what I could see, nobody had managed to put more than two pieces together at the bottom. It was clear that we were either in first place, way ahead of everybody else, or not in the race at all.

"If looks could kill, we'd be dead," Teal said.

I looked up at her.

"The other teams," she said, in answer to my glance. "They don't seem impressed with us."

"I didn't think that impressing them is what we're supposed to be trying to do."

"People are like sheep," she said. "They all just follow the same path."

"It's usually safer," I said.

"My father said the secret to his success was always zigging when other people zagged."

"Then your father would be happy with what we're doing, I guess."

"*Happy* might be too strong a word to ever describe his mood," she said. "We would have at least gotten his attention, and believe me, that was not always the easiest thing to do."

We finished attaching the tube and stopped to look at the activity around us. The others were in masks and fins, and most were either in or under the water. There were four lifeguards standing around the pool. They looked like I imagined Navy SEALs would

look like—matching bathing suits, muscles and short hair. Their arms were crossed, and they were staring at the people in the pool. If they were a team, I bet they could have assembled the figure at the bottom of the pool pretty quickly.

Devon and Thomas came back with the masks and fins. Sergeant Miller was right behind them. I'd seen him watching us, but he'd stayed away up to this point.

"You certainly have an interesting approach," Sergeant Miller said.

"Are we doing this wrong?" Devon asked.

"It's certainly different."

"But, it's all right?" Thomas asked.

"I didn't say that either, but keep in mind that you're saying by your actions that the other eight teams are wrong," he said.

Devon and Thomas exchanged a worried look.

"And further," Sergeant Miller continued, "that every other group that has ever done this activity has been wrong."

The worried looks on Devon's and Thomas's faces turned to panic.

"We're not saying all those people are wrong," I said. "Just that we're right."

He scowled. "Pretty easy to see who's driving this car. Do the other three of you agree with him?"

"If we didn't agree, we wouldn't be doing it," Teal said. "And now that you've said your piece, you're doing nothing more than taking away our focus. Why don't you go and bother one of the other teams for a while?"

"What?"

"This is about our team. This is between the four of us. You're here to give us instructions, not to slow us down. You should leave us alone now," she said.

Sergeant Miller suddenly got red in the face. "Do what you want." He turned and marched away.

"I don't think he's used to people talking to him that way," I said.

"I'd be *afraid* to talk to him that way," Devon added.

"What was he going to do, hit me?"

"I think he could snap your head off your shoulders if he wanted to," Thomas said.

"Do the three of you want to keep doing it this way?" I asked. "Do you think we're wrong?"

"Maybe," Thomas said.

Devon nodded in agreement.

"Teal?" I asked.

"Maybe we are, but really, what does it matter?" she said.

"But we won't get any points," Thomas said.

She laughed. "So, we lose some pretend points."

She definitely had attitude.

"They could kick us out of the program," Devon said.

She laughed even louder. "For doing it a different way? Come on. Besides, we all paid a lot of money, so they're not going to make us leave."

The other two looked reassured. I wasn't. I hadn't paid any money. If the camp staff thought I was a problem, they might kick me out.

"Besides, even if we did change what we're doing and do it the way everybody else is doing it, we'd never catch them. We'd still finish last," she added.

"If we even finished at all," I said. "Look, according to the instructions we were given, we are following the rules." I paused. "But if you really believe we should be doing it the same way as everybody else...well."

"That's not an option. We're doing it this way," Teal said. "Does anybody have anything more they want to say?"

Devon and Thomas meekly shook their heads. There was no question that this girl didn't take prisoners. I was liking her better by the minute, even as I was getting a little more afraid of her.

"You really *do* think we're right, right?" she asked me.

"At this point, does it matter?"

"Not really. Even if I knew we were doing this wrong, I wouldn't change." She hesitated. "Still, I'd like to be right."

"We're right. Can you pass me a yellow tube?"

Seven

I tightened the clamp to attach the last piece.

“What do you think?” I asked as I held it up and spun it slightly.

“It looks perfect,” Devon said.

“Yeah, perfect—well, at least how I remember the diagram being,” Thomas said.

“It’s the right pattern,” I said.

“And it’s not like we can rely on other groups’ work to give us an example,” Teal said. “Nobody is even close to finished.”

I’d been so focused that I hadn’t paid any attention to anybody else or what they were doing. I put down our structure, stood up and walked to the edge of the pool. It was hard to see clearly through the deep and the distortion of the water, but from what I could tell, all of the other groups still had plenty of tubes and clamps on the pool deck.

We had our structure assembled—the first part of the instructions—and now we had to install it at the bottom of the pool.

I took a mask, slipped it on top of my head and grabbed a pair of flippers. I sat down on the edge of the pool and dangled my feet in the water. It was warm—almost body-temperature warm. I grabbed one flipper and slipped it on and then the second.

Teal sat down on the edge beside me and quickly did the same. “You ready?” she asked.

“I was born ready.”

“Did you get that from an action movie?” she asked.

“It sounded smarter and cooler inside my head. Let’s just get this finished.”

“We have company,” Devon said.

We all turned in the direction he was looking. There, standing beside and talking to Sergeant Miller, were both Dr. Phillips and Colonel Sanderson. Any question about why they were here vanished as the sergeant pointed directly at us.

“I can’t see how this is good,” Thomas said.

“Maybe they just wanted to witness our victory,” Teal suggested.

“Or see what team was so stupid that they did the whole thing wrong,” Devon added.

“I think we’re about to find out,” she said as they walked toward us.

Sergeant Miller looked angry. Dr. Phillips appeared to be studying the situation, and Colonel Sanderson looked amused.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen and lady,” Colonel Sanderson said.

“Hello, sir,” we said, almost in unison.

Colonel Sanderson picked up our structure and examined it. With both hands he applied some stress. The plastic tubes flexed but the metal clamps held.

“What do you think?” Devon asked.

He didn't answer at first. Sergeant Miller's scowl deepened. He'd given his opinion without even being asked or saying a word.

"What I think doesn't matter," Colonel Sanderson finally said. "Are you all happy with your alternate approach?"

"Definitely," Teal said. I nodded in agreement.

"That's two out of four. You two don't look so certain," he said, pointing first to Devon and then to Thomas.

"Can't you tell us if we're wrong?" Thomas asked.

"So far, all I can tell you is that it's incomplete. Your structure is up here instead of down there."

"And if we put it down there?" I asked.

"Then we'll know if it's right or wrong." He paused. "Before you continue, we'd like to offer the four of you an option."

"What kind of an option?" Teal said.

"If any one of you wants to abandon this route, I will reassign you to another team," Dr. Phillips said.

"Which team?" Thomas asked. We all shot him a dirty look. "I'm just curious, that's all."

"Any team you like," Dr. Phillips answered.

I could tell both Thomas and Devon were thinking about it. I was thinking about it too. Was I really that certain?

"Sorry, no takers," Teal said.

"And the others?" Colonel Sanderson asked.

"I'm staying," Devon said.

"Me too," Thomas said.

"And you, Houston?" the colonel asked.

Sergeant Miller scoffed, "He's the ringleader."

Colonel Sanderson's eyes flared for a split second. If you weren't looking or didn't know what to look for, you wouldn't have seen it, but I did.

"He is a *leader*. No question about that," Colonel Sanderson said.

"I'm staying. We're a team."

"And if Sergeant Miller is right and you are the leader, you could take the entire team to a better situation if you wanted to. Isn't that what a good leader should do?" he asked.

What was he telling me? Was he saying we were wrong and that I could rescue everybody?

"We're sticking together with this," Teal said, answering for me.

"Well, I guess we now have our answer," Colonel Sanderson said. He turned to the other two men. "We should let them get back to work."

They spun around and left.

"Who's going down to the bottom of the pool with me?" I asked.

"Me," Teal said. "I'm on the school swim team."

"Your school has a swim team?"

“Doesn’t yours?”

“No. We don’t have a pool.”

“But you can swim, right?”

“Of course, I can swim.”

“Then it’s the two of us.”

She slipped on her mask and into the pool. I did the same.

“Hand us the structure,” she said. “And be careful.”

Devon and Thomas picked it up together and gently handed it to me. I held on to the pool edge with one hand and to the structure with my other. I lowered it slightly. It floated. I tried to pull it down, and it bobbed back to the top. I pushed it again, and its shape shifted as if it might pop one of the clamps. This wasn’t good.

“What’s wrong?” Teal asked.

“It wants to float, and we need to get it to the bottom.”

Teal put both hands on it. “We’ll just push it harder and—”

“No!” I exclaimed, cutting her off. “It’ll come apart. The clamps won’t hold that much pressure or stress.”

We all exchanged looks. I knew what they were thinking. And then Devon put it out there.

“This means we screwed up, right? It has to be assembled on the bottom or it will break into pieces.”

I had to think, and them staring at me wasn’t helping. Wait. “We have to let water get into the tubes to create neutral buoyancy.”

“How do we do that?”

“I think like this.”

I squeezed one of the tubes right at the end, by the clamp, and water flowed in. I could actually feel it get a little bit heavier and sink slightly. I did it with a second and then a third tube. Each time I could feel the difference in weight.

“I think it’s ready. Teal, can you go down and have a look at the place where we’re going to lock it in?”

Teal nodded her head. She dove, flippers coming to the surface and splashing all of us as she headed for the bottom.

“She’s sort of like a mermaid,” Devon said.

“Yeah, a hot mermaid,” Thomas added.

“A mermaid could only help.”

She broke the surface, saving me from having to say anything more. She exhaled and then took in a big breath of air.

“It’s simple. There’s a metal slot that one of the tubes slides into, and then we tighten a couple of screws to lock it in place.”

“I don’t think we have a screwdriver,” Thomas said.

“They can be tightened by hand. Well, let’s do it,” Teal said.

It was time. Either this was going to work, or it was going to snap into pieces.

I took a deep breath and then another and another. “Let’s go.”

I dove down, pushing the structure in front of me. It was still fighting a bit to get to the surface, the tubes shifting, but it was holding.

Teal had already reached the bottom and was holding on to the metal bracket with one hand, pumping her legs above her to stay in place at the bottom. I struggled down, trying to get the tube in my hand into the slot. It was slipping off to the side and trying to rise up—my whole body was trying to rise back to the surface. Teal reached out and grabbed the structure and guided it into the groove. It seemed to lock in, and I tried my best to hold it in place as she began to tighten the screws. I could feel my lungs starting to sting. I took in a little breath with my nose, capturing some of the air held in my mask. It wasn't enough air to refill my lungs. I didn't know how much longer I could last—but then Teal gave a little thumbs-up, pushed off the bottom and headed for the surface. I took one hand off the structure and then the other. The shape changed slightly as it tried to rise to the surface, but it held! It was locked in place!

I spun around and scrambled toward the surface. It seemed so far away...up and up... and I broke the surface. I took in a deep breath of air, and the burning in my lungs stopped.

Devon and Thomas were cheering, jumping up and down on the pool deck. Teal reached up and gave them both a high five. I pushed toward the edge of the pool, and they gave me the same greeting.

"We did it," Teal said as she swam to my side.

"Yeah, I guess we—"

She reached out and gave me a hug that stopped me from finishing my sentence. I felt like I needed more oxygen again—almost like I'd stopped breathing.

She released me. I had the urge to look away or down, but she was looking right at me, so I looked right back at her and—

"Your necklace," I said. "It's not there."

She reached up and felt for it, then looked down, confirming what I'd just said. She looked shocked.

"It's got to be in the pool. I'll get it," I said without thinking.

I took a big breath and dove. It had to be close to where our structure was. I headed straight down. I came to the bottom and opened my eyes as wide as I could. I didn't see it. I kept kicking and kept looking, but no luck. I needed air. I didn't want to go to the surface and tell her I hadn't found it. I kept feeling around on the bottom with my hands. I circled all around our structure, and there it was!

The gold of the chain glistened, and I could see the diamond locket was still attached. I wrapped my fingers around the diamond. I spun and pushed off with my feet and shot up to the surface, splashing out and gasping for air.

"Did you get it?"

I took a couple of strokes and came up next to her at the side of the pool. I pushed my mask off my face and onto the top of my head but didn't answer. Then I smiled and pulled my hand out of the water and offered the necklace to her.

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

She took the chain from my hand and then threw her arms around me again and gave me an even bigger hug. She finally released me, and I took another breath.

"You have no idea how important this is," she said.

"It looks expensive."

“It isn’t about the money.”

Only people who had money could say things like that.

“The really important thing is that we finished,” Devon said. “We did the task.”

“We’re the only ones who are finished,” Thomas added. “We won!”

“Or we lost first,” Teal added.

“I guess we’ll find out.”

At this point I almost didn’t care. We were done, I’d found Teal’s necklace, and she’d hugged me—twice.

Eight

We had all changed into the blue camp jumpsuits they'd provided and reassembled in the main conference room. Everybody seemed to be talking to everybody—except for us. It was like the four of us were in a plastic bubble. We were at the back of the room, separated from the others by rows of empty seats. Of course, being separated wasn't stopping people from staring at us. I knew what it was like to be separate and stared at. Being different was my life.

"I'm thirsty," I said. "Anybody else want something to drink?"

"Thank you for asking," Teal said. "Could I have a water, please?"

I got up and headed for the foyer, where bottles of water and juice had been put out. There were a couple of other kids getting drinks.

"You're wrong."

I turned around. It was Ashley.

"And worse than wrong, what you did was cheating," she said.

"Cheating?"

"Yes, cheating. Everybody else did things the right way, and you and your team tried to beat the system. I hope they ask you to leave the camp."

"You can't be serious."

"I am completely serious. There is no place in space for cheaters."

I couldn't stop myself from laughing. She looked offended. Good. Time to offend her more. "First off, we're not going to space; second, this isn't an audition for an episode of *Star Trek*. And finally, we didn't just do something different than the rest of you, we did something *smarter*."

I grabbed two bottles of water from the table and spun around, leaving her standing there open-mouthed. I grabbed the door handle, and suddenly she was beside me again.

"We finished the structure the right way. Only one other team did that, and we were first," she said. "We did it before them."

"You finished way after us. That would make you second, and I know it was three teams that finished."

"We'll soon see who was first and who was smart and who was just a cheater."

"We will." I tried to give her a smug smile as I held the door open for her.

She glared at me. Somehow my being polite made her more angry.

She stomped through the door, and I followed.

"Here's your water," I said, handing it to Teal.

"Thank you. That was sweet of you." She gave me a smile, and I felt so embarrassed I had to look away. I took a seat beside her.

"That's the second time he got you something," Devon said.

I wasn't sure what he was talking about.

"The necklace," he said, and then I understood. "But really, I guess, the diamond. That's real, right?"

"Of course," Teal replied.

"A diamond that big, it must be worth a lot," Devon said.

"A whole lot," Thomas added. "I was thinking it was worth at least forty thousand dollars."

"That can't be right," I said. I turned to Teal. "Right?"

"Probably more."

"Wow. I had no idea," I said.

"It's my mother's. It was a present from my father."

"Boy, would they have been mad if you'd lost it," Thomas said.

"My mother wouldn't have noticed, and my father has been dead for two years."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"He was old. He was almost eighty-four when he died."

"How come your father was so old?" Devon asked.

I could tell that being tactful wasn't one of his strengths. Apparently in this little group I was the one with better social skills.

"My mother was my father's fourth wife, and he moved onto his fifth wife and fifth family before I was old enough to have much memory of him," she said. "It wasn't like I knew him very well. His next wife after my mother objected to him having contact with me or any of his other children. I have five-year-old twin half-sisters from her, plus a half-brother who's in his twenties, two half-brothers and a half-sister in their thirties, and of course there are the four children from his very first marriage, who are much older than my mother."

"That must have made for some pretty confusing Christmas celebrations," Thomas said and gave a weak little laugh.

"There wasn't a lot of shared time together. That was never the Wellington way."

"Wellington? Wait, you're not talking about J.P. Wellington, are you?" Devon asked.

"That's my father."

"*The J.P. Wellington?*" Thomas asked.

"The one and only."

"Wow," Devon said, and Thomas nodded in agreement.

"Who's J.P. Wellington?" I asked.

"I think he was one of the richest people in the country," Thomas explained.

I shrugged. "I wasn't invited to his Christmas celebrations either."

"That means your mother is probably, like, an actress or a model?" Thomas said.

"All of his wives two through five were."

"That figures," I said and then realized I'd said it out loud.

"And what does that mean?" Teal asked. She was looking directly at me and didn't look pleased.

"It's just that, well, you know, I guess, I mean, it's just that you look like you could be a model because...well...you're very model-like."

"I'll take that as a compliment," she said.

I felt relieved and embarrassed all at once.

"Is your mother still a model?" Devon asked. "Would I know her?"

"You know models?" Thomas asked him.

"*Sports Illustrated* models."

"She was in that," Teal said.

"Who's your mother?"

"Tasha St. Jermaine. Have you heard of her?"

We all shook our heads.

"I just look at the pictures, I don't pay much attention to the names," Devon said.

"It was way before I was born," Teal said. "Mainly she did runway and print ads. She was a Calvin Klein spokesperson. But that was years ago. Now she just lives the good life. We have homes in New York, London and Saint Lucia."

"I thought we were doing well with a summer home in the Hamptons," Devon said.

"It would be amazing to live in any of those places," Thomas added.

"It would be, but I go to boarding school in Switzerland, and I'm just home for summers," Teal said.

"But you're here, and this is summer," Devon said. Again, with the tact.

She didn't answer right away.

"This is only two weeks," I said, coming to her defense.

"Yes, two weeks here and then three weeks at a riding camp in Brazil."

"That means you're not going to be home much at all this summer," Devon said.

I was looking at Teal when he said that, and I saw her flinch ever so slightly.

"Look," I said. "I'm just glad you're here with us."

She didn't say anything, but there was something in her eyes that said *thank you*. I gave her a little nod, and she returned it.

"It looks like it's going to start," Devon noted.

The four men who had served as lifeguards earlier had come into the room and stood off to the side.

"Wasn't this meeting supposed to start twenty minutes ago?" Devon asked.

"They're probably trying to figure out what to do with us," Teal said. "I think we surprised them."

"Surprise is okay. Upset is not so okay," Devon said. "Do you think there's a chance they might send us home?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Teal said. "Nobody thinks that should happen."

"Well, some people do," I said.

They all turned to me.

"That girl. Ashley. She said we were cheaters and should be kicked out of camp."

"Which one is she?" Teal demanded. She got to her feet.

"I'll show her to you later," I said. "Things are going to start—just sit down."

Sergeant Miller, Dr. Phillips and Colonel Sanderson came in and took seats at the table at the front. I felt uneasy. Did they always bring in the big guns for something this simple? Maybe it wasn't that simple. Maybe they *were* going to kick us out.

"Let's begin the debrief," Sergeant Miller said. The room went silent. "As you are aware, there was a difference in opinion and technique in completing your first assignment."

Multiple heads turned around to look at us. The expressions were not friendly. Ashley was glaring at us—actually, she was staring right at me.

"As you might not be aware, the military works on SOP. That means standard operating procedure," Sergeant Miller said.

"As does space travel and exploration," Dr. Phillips added. "As such, it was very unusual for one of the teams to pursue a less than standard approach to the assignment."

"He's talking about us," Devon whispered.

"Of course he's talking about us. Don't be an idiot," Teal said quietly. "Shut up and listen."

"In the twelve months of our program's operation, no team has attempted this assignment in any way other than the standard practice," Sergeant Miller said. "That is more than 150 teams."

"Further," Colonel Sanderson said, "this identical task was assigned to all NASA crews being trained for manned space flight, including my own training. That means that over two thousand men and women who were in the space program, including five hundred astronauts who have been in space, were given this assignment." He paused. "Would anybody care to risk a guess as to how many of them did it by building the structure on the deck?"

There was silence.

"One team," Colonel Sanderson said. He held up a single finger.

"Sorry," I whispered so only my team could hear me. "It's my fault."

"The delay in beginning this meeting was that we wanted to go back and review the tape of the manner in which Sergeant Miller gave the instructions," Dr. Phillips said.

"We tape everything," the sergeant explained. "You'll notice cameras in every instruction and training area." He pointed to the corners of the room. I'd noticed the cameras in the corridors but hadn't seen them in the pool area or here until now.

"And in reviewing those tapes, and those of the previous fifteen times those instructions were given, we are now aware that they were given in the identical way at all sessions," Dr. Phillips said. "Sergeant Miller was following procedure exactly to specifications."

"We also asked for confirmation from our astronaut training facility and got confirmation that the exact same instructions have been given to all the men and women training for space," Colonel Sanderson added. "Those instructions were word for word the same. Every single person has been offered the same instructions in those words." He looked right at us. "Words that your group chose to interpret in an entirely different way. Do you have anything you want to say at this time?"

I couldn't answer immediately because it felt like my chest was in a vise. I took in a deep breath and then rose to my feet. I had to say something.

"They only did it because I told them it was okay. It's my fault."

Teal jumped to her feet. "It's nobody's fault. We're a team."

Devon got up as well and gave Thomas a nudge with his arm, and he rose too.

“Houston is our leader, but we made a team decision,” Teal said.

“I’m impressed that in the face of all this, you are still willing to stand as a team. That’s impressive all by itself,” Colonel Sanderson said.

At least we’d impressed him with the solidarity of our stupidity.

“Could you tell us exactly what you heard that made you choose the direction you pursued?” Colonel Sanderson asked.

I took another deep breath. “Sergeant Miller said we were to assemble and attach the structure to the bottom of the pool.”

Everybody looked at me like I needed to say more. So I did.

“He said assemble and attach *to* the bottom. He didn’t say we had to assemble it *at* the bottom. He gave us two tasks. We assembled it and then attached it to the bottom,” I explained.

“If you want to punish one of us, you have to punish all of us,” Teal said.

“Why would we punish you for being right?” Colonel Sanderson questioned.

“We were right?” Teal asked.

He nodded, and there was a gasp and then a collective buzz as people all around the room started talking. Sergeant Miller barked out an order and silence was restored.

“Does that mean the rest of us were wrong?” somebody asked.

“Not wrong, just not as correct,” Colonel Sanderson said.

He stood up and started clapping, followed by both Sergeant Miler and Dr. Phillips, who also got to their feet. Then the four silent lifeguards joined in, and then others. Other people got to their feet, and some people started to clap. Ashley had gotten to her feet, but she wasn’t clapping.

Nine

I sat bolt upright at the sound of the alarm bells. They were loud, and on top of that, the darkness was punctuated by a strobe light going off in one of the top corners of my room. I climbed out of bed, stumbled across the floor and hit the switch—nothing happened. The bell kept ringing and the strobe kept flashing. Was there a fire?

I looked down at my watch. It was two in the morning. Exactly two in the morning. This wasn't random. This was something planned. Nothing accidental happened at exactly two in the morning.

I opened up the door, and the bells got louder. There were other people—other campers—standing at their doorways or in the hall. There were no lights except for other strobes. It made everything look eerie. I could see that everybody was in pajamas. I was in my track pants and a T-shirt because I didn't even own pajamas.

Then the PA came to life.

“Emergency evacuation! Emergency evacuation! Emergency evacuation!”

Everybody froze for a few seconds, and then somebody headed down the hall, followed by a second person, which started a little stampede. I ducked back into my room and grabbed my running shoes. My socks were tucked inside.

I moved quickly down the hall to a door marked *Exit*, following the others through and down some stairs, and then we all went out another door and stood outside.

In front of us were two more military-type people—a girl and a guy, both with short hair, wearing matching camouflage pants, white T-shirts and heavy boots. They were taking attendance, ticking off names as campers passed by. Teachers did that for fire drills to make sure we were all out.

“Team six all accounted for!” one of them barked out.

A few seconds later the second yelled, “Team three all accounted for.”

They weren't taking individual attendance. They were taking team attendance. Which meant this was definitely some sort of drill. I looked around for my team. Looking back, I saw Teal. She saw me as well, and I motioned for her to come forward. She glided through the crowd, excusing herself, until she was at my side.

She was in pajamas but she was wearing shoes—no, they were more like fancy slippers—and her hair was perfect. Had she stopped to brush her hair? No, she wouldn't have got here this fast if she had.

“I think this is a drill,” I said. “A test or an assignment. I don't think there's a real emergency.”

We came up to the two people taking attendance. One of them asked for our name and team, then almost instantly yelled out, “Team eight is all accounted for!”

That meant both Thomas and Devon were already through. We stumbled forward and found them, and I explained what I thought was happening, although I had no idea why or what it all meant. I dropped down to put on my socks and shoes. I noticed that Thomas was in his socks, and Devon had bare feet.

Sergeant Miller appeared out of nowhere and asked the teams to assemble. The two

military types called out the numbers and put each team in a row. I had the feeling teams were being assembled in the order they had come out. We were third from the front.

“Good evening, everybody,” Sergeant Miller yelled, and all the talking stopped. “Or should I say good morning.”

“Good morning starts in about four hours,” Thomas said under his breath.

“As you may have surmised by now, there is no emergency. We simply wanted to see your reaction to a perceived emergency. But since we have you all out here, we’re going to run a little exercise.”

Teal looked at me and gave me a knowing nod.

“And by ‘exercise,’ I do mean exercise,” Sergeant Miller said, “and by ‘a little,’ well, I mean a lot. An awful lot. And when I said ‘run,’ I meant we’re all going for a run.”

“But I don’t have shoes!” somebody called out.

“Welcome to the club,” Devon replied.

“You made a decision. If this was an emergency in space, you would have to deal with whatever you had available at that moment. Some of you have shoes.”

“Way to go, Houston,” Thomas said.

“And just as you were timed on your evacuation, with points assigned, you will also be timed individually on your run, and those times will be added together to get a team score. Are there any questions?”

“How far are we going to run?” somebody asked.

“You will find out the distance of the run when the first runner reaches the target distance,” Sergeant Miller said.

“But why are we doing this?” someone else asked. “What has this got to do with space? It’s not like anybody runs in space.”

“Physical condition is a vital part of being in space, as is survival training in the event that a launch goes down in uninhabited territory and the astronauts need to live until help arrives. Any more questions?”

“What happens if we just go back to bed?” Teal asked.

“You will be asked to leave the program for noncompliance. You do remember signing a compliance agreement, correct?” Sergeant Miller asked.

Teal didn’t respond, but her eyes got dark, and I knew she was getting ready to say something that would probably get her in trouble.

“It’s no big deal. I’d like you to stick around,” I said quietly to her, and her look of anger subsided slightly.

“Enough talk. Time to do,” Sergeant Miller said.



The big lights made the track as bright as day. I didn’t even know the camp had a track. The team at the front—the first team to evacuate—was the one with Ashley in it. That wasn’t a surprise by itself. What was, was that all of them were dressed and wearing running shoes. What were the odds of them all being ready for a run in the middle of the night and still being the first team to get outside? It couldn’t be by chance. They’d known in advance what was going to happen and had gotten ready, but how?

“Can I have your attention, please!” Sergeant Miller bellowed, and everybody stopped talking. “You are to run laps of the track until you have completed the assigned distance.

As you pass the start/finish line each time, you will be tagged. You have to decide how fast you run and how much energy you conserve.”

“Can you at least give us a hint about how far we’re going to run?” somebody asked.

“Certainly. It is definitely less than one hundred miles.”

Sergeant Miller kept talking. I leaned closer to Teal and whispered to her about how Ashley’s team was dressed.

“I noticed,” she said. “How do you figure they knew?”

I shook my head. “I’m just thinking that if they knew this was going to happen, maybe they know the distance as well.”

“Then we should stay with them,” she said. “Are you a runner?”

“I can run—you know, playing sports. How about you?”

“Equestrian team.”

“Like, horses?”

“Yes. We had a riding stable at school.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, and she looked a little hurt.

“Not that there’s anything wrong with horses. You didn’t happen to bring one along, did you?”

“No horse, but we’re still not going to lose.”

I nodded in agreement, but really, could we beat them? I guessed we’d have to try.



We’d just finished the first lap. Most of the teams seemed to be saving their energy. Not Ashley’s team, which meant not our team. All four of them were in the lead, and we were the next four runners. I didn’t know how much longer we could last at this pace. I could already feel it in my legs. Devon was complaining about his feet hurting, and Thomas seemed to be limping. Teal was doing her best, but her slippers were flopping up and down as she ran.

After the second lap we stopped running in a row and formed a line. I was in front, Teal behind me and the guys behind her. The same thing was happening to the team in front of us. Ashley was starting to pull away. Rather than slowing down, she yelled for her teammates to run harder. That worked for another hundred yards, and then they started falling back again.

I was pulling away from my team as well.

“Just go,” Teal said. “Just go and stay with her—no, beat her,” she said through puffed breathes.

I’d actually been considering slowing down, but now I started digging in harder. I stretched out my stride to try to eat up more distance with each step.

We passed by the finish line again. That was three laps, so we’d covered three-quarters of a mile. Ashley was still pulling away, but I was close on the heels of two of her teammates. I’d be catching them soon. A few more strides and I was beside the last one.

“Man, is Ashley going to be mad at you,” I said as I matched his stride.

He looked at me but didn’t answer. His mouth was wide open, and he was sucking in air. He started running a bit harder and then just stopped. I looked back. He was bent over, trying to catch his breath. Teal, followed by a couple of kids from other teams, passed by him. Thomas and Devon were much farther back.

One more lap, then two, then three. Ashley leading, me following, lapping people as we ran. We came up to a curve, and I saw Thomas and Devon ahead of us. We were soon going to lap them the way we'd lapped probably two-thirds of the people out here. Teal was on the same lap as Ashley and me, although well behind us.

I just had to keep Ashley in sight. She couldn't possibly keep up this pace for much longer. A stitch was starting to develop in my side, and my chest was aching. I didn't know how much longer I could do this. Maybe I had to get into her head, and I could only do that if I could catch her.

I wanted to slow down. Really, I wanted to stop. Instead I sped up. I started to try to match her stride so we were taking exactly the same number of steps, but I lengthened each stride by a couple of inches. With each stride I was closing the gap ever so slightly. I came up to the curve and hugged the inner edge of the track. The shortest distance was at the inner edge. I was right behind her, but I didn't think she knew that.

I shortened my stride again to match hers. I wanted to stay right here for a few minutes to let my legs rest a little, and try to catch some wind. I was going to pass her, but I wanted it to look like I was out for a stroll rather than sucking air and fighting the stitch in my side and the ache in my legs. We were coming up to another curve. This was the time to pass. If she wanted to retake the lead, she'd have to go wide. She'd have to run farther to pass me.

I lengthened my stride again. Just as we were approaching the curve, I came right up beside her.

"Nice night for a run," I said as I surged past her.

In that second, I glanced over, and her expression was one of shock and surprise. I popped to the inside of the track, right in front of her, and then I suddenly slowed down. She bumped into my back, stumbling.

"Come on, try to be more careful!" I yelled out.

I increased my speed through the curve. I'd caused her to lose her stride, and now I wanted her to lose her concentration and confidence. I didn't look back, but I could hear her right behind me. And then her footfalls were more to my right. She was trying to pass me. Without looking back, I picked up my pace. I wasn't letting her by.

The curve ended and we were on the straightaway. The start/finish line was no more than fifty meters away—maybe this would be the end. I just needed to hold her off for fifty meters. I could hear her coming up on the outside. I had to fight the urge to cut her off again, knowing I couldn't do that. I dug down deeper, inched farther forward and crossed the finish line before her...and nobody signaled that we'd reached the end of our run.

She came up beside me. "Is that all you got?" she asked as she shot by me.

Before I could answer she pulled away. She was kicking it into another gear. Was she doing that just to break me? Did she know we were in the final lap?

She hit the curve and looked over to see me falling farther behind. A smug smile lit up her face. She was taunting me without saying a word.

I hit the curve and tried to dig in deeper, but I had nothing left. I was running on fumes. The only reason I was still moving was that I was too numb to stop. Ashley was so far ahead. There was no way I could catch her. It didn't matter if this was the last lap or not. She was going to win.

I shifted to the outside to pass two more people. Everybody else except Ashley was going slower. I came up to the second person, and it was Teal.

"Keep...going...stay with her," she said between breaths.

I wanted to tell her it was useless, but I didn't have the air to talk. I nodded and picked

up my pace, leaving Teal behind.

Ashley hit the next curve, looked back and saw that she hadn't lost me completely. I was close enough to see her eyes widen in surprise. She started going faster. How was that even possible? How did she still have another gear in her? She could only be running this hard for one reason—she knew this was the last lap. This was my only shot. I'd give it everything I had, because if I couldn't catch her, I was completely done. I found something more in me. My legs were rubbery, but somehow that gave me some bounce.

Ashley was going fast, but I was going slightly faster. We were matching strides, but mine were just a little bit longer. Closer and closer. She left the curve and I was right on her tail. We came down the straightaway and I was still gaining—until I stumbled and fell to the ground, my face skidding along the track!

I pushed myself up enough to see Ashley cross the line. She was stopped by one of the trainers. This was the last lap. I'd almost caught her. Almost. I still had to finish. I got to my knees and tried to catch my breath. She'd finished and she'd won. I felt like just lying down on the track. Instead I got back to my feet. I felt wobbly, but I had to get to the end, to finish. I started moving. At first so slowly. Then I picked up my speed. Faster and faster, until I was at a full sprint.

I crossed the line and was greeted by Sergeant Miller. "Second place," he said as he put his hands on my shoulders. "Take him away for examination."

"What?" I asked.

"Medical and intelligence."

"I'm fine...I'm okay...I don't need to be looked at."

"Everybody will be assessed. No choice."

A woman reached out and took me by the arm and started to lead me away. I wanted to argue, but I didn't have the energy. Besides, it felt like her arm was all that was holding me up.

Ten

They'd attached a series of pads and wires to my chest and both sides of my forehead. There was a blood-pressure thing on my arm, and it kept inflating, getting tighter and tighter, and then gradually deflating.

"How are you feeling?" the nurse asked.

"I'm good. I really don't need this. I'm fine."

"Everybody is being medically evaluated after the run," he said. "In fact, as soon as I take a blood sample, you'll be ready to go."

"You're taking blood?"

"We need to do a full lab screening," he explained. He tied an elastic tourniquet around my upper arm. "And here we go."

He slipped the needle in and blood started to flow into the plastic tube. It quickly filled, and he replaced that tube with a second and then a third.

"Are you planning on leaving me some?" I asked.

"Just one more." He removed the third vial and clipped on a fourth, which again quickly filled. He removed the needle and replaced it with a cotton ball. "Put your finger right there and you're all finished."

"Good. I want to catch at least a few hours of sleep."

"You're not going to sleep now."

"We don't have another run, do we?" I asked.

"One more test."

"I don't have much blood left to give."

"This one doesn't involve blood. Ink. This is a written test."



I finished going over the questions one more time. I hadn't changed a single answer. It was a hard test, a combination of simple calculation, problem solving, some algebra and calculus, as well as geometry. While most questions related in some way to space and space travel, with some questions I just didn't understand what they getting at or testing.

I took a slow, long look around the room. Everybody was working at their tests. Nobody looked happy. When I'd entered the conference room, there was only Ashley in there, already taking the test. She'd looked up from her desk and glared at me. As each person finished the race and then their medical, they joined us in the conference room. It looked like Teal had finished fourth or fifth.

I got to my feet and started to the front. At that moment Ashley got to her feet, and our eyes locked. I knew what she was thinking, just as she knew what I was thinking. We got to the instructor's desk at the same instant and slapped down our tests.

"Finished," I said.

"I finished first."

"Both of you are dismissed," the instructor said. "Stop disturbing those still taking the test. Go and get breakfast."

We both turned on our heels and headed for the door. I got the feeling Ashley was trying to get there faster than me. I wasn't going to play her game. There really wasn't much point in even trying unless I was going to sprint or grab her by the collar. She opened the door and stepped through. I followed and closed the door behind us.

"I beat you," she said.

"You started writing the test first."

"I started writing first because I finished running the race first. I beat you there too."

I shrugged. "Not by much."

"I'm going to beat you by a whole lot more on the test."

"Sure you will. You keep saying that until the marks come back."

"You think you did better than me?" she snapped. "I know that some of those questions were university-level calculus."

"Really? They seemed pretty basic to me."

She laughed. "I know for a fact that other questions were advanced algebra."

"And you'd know because you're in university?" I asked.

"I'm going into ninth grade, but I receive additional tutoring in those subjects."

"Well, I guess if you're not good at them, then it makes sense for you to receive special remedial help."

"What?"

"That's why people take extra courses—because they need extra help. If you're nice to me, I'll help explain some of the questions to you when we get the tests back. No, wait—being nice isn't something you seem to be able to do."

She looked so angry I thought her head might explode. I wanted to push her enough to see that happen.

"Everybody thinks it's more than a little strange how your whole team showed up dressed in running shoes and managed to evacuate the building faster than anybody else," I said.

"Shouldn't everybody wear shoes for a fire alarm? Hey, you had running shoes with you."

"I had running shoes that I carried outside, but nobody told me to do it. Only one of us cheated." I pointed at her.

She glared at me for a few seconds and then looked down. "We didn't cheat," she finally said.

"But you did know."

"Knowing isn't cheating. Not the way you cheated by assembling that structure on the deck instead of at the bottom of the pool."

"That wasn't cheating. Just being smarter. Anyway, we'll see what the camp director has to say about this." I paused. A long and loaded pause. "Of course, maybe he hasn't even thought to ask any of you if you had a heads-up, but I could suggest it."

"You wouldn't do that."

"Actually, I can promise you I won't...on one condition."

“What condition?”

“Tell me how you *knew*.”

She tried to stare me down. It wasn’t working, and she knew it. Finally, she let out a big sigh. “I did some research. I got in touch online with two people who had been in two different camps here. They both told me they had a two-in-the-morning run on the first night.”

“And you knew about the length of the run the same way, right?”

“Both times it was eleven laps.” She paused. “I didn’t cheat, I just did research. That’s all. Is doing research wrong?”

I shrugged.

“Do you shrug to everything?”

“Do you smirk at everything?” I asked.

She smirked, and then it changed to an awkward smile.

“Do they always run medical tests and give an exam after the run?” I asked.

“I didn’t even think to ask about it. I was surprised,” she said.

“I didn’t expect them to draw blood—that was strange. Why would they do that?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t know about either of those. Were you able to answer all the questions on the test?”

“I answered them all, but I know I didn’t get them all right.”

She snorted. “I don’t think even I got them all right.”

This girl seemed to specialize in being smug and annoying. Then I thought, if this had been a math test at school, I could have said something equally stupid. Was that why some people found me annoying?

“Why are you getting help with university-level courses in math?” I asked.

“My aunt and uncle are academically demanding.”

Aunt and uncle? Why was she living with—

“My parents died in a car accident,” she explained.

I laughed. I didn’t mean to, but I did.

“You think that’s funny?” she demanded.

“No, no! Of course not. It’s just that I live with my aunt and uncle. My parents were killed in a car accident too.”

“That’s not nice to mock me like that.” She looked genuinely upset.

“I’m not mocking you. It’s true.”

Her expression softened. “That’s a really strange coincidence.”

That felt awkward to me, and judging from her expression, it was awkward for her too. That was why I never talked to people about it. There was an uncomfortable silence that I needed to break.

“Look, I’m starving. We should go and have breakfast,” I said.

“Together?” she asked.

“We could eat at separate tables if you want,” I suggested. “I just need to grab some food before I head back to my room to get some sleep.”

“I have some bad news. If things run the way they normally do, then they’re not letting

us go back to bed. The whole day is going to be packed with activities.”

“Then let’s go and get breakfast. Maybe I can lay my head down on the table for a while.”

We headed for the dining hall.

“This doesn’t make us friends,” she said.

“I’m not really looking for friends, so that’s not a problem.”

Eleven

Ashley was right. They didn't let us go back to sleep. Now, at suppertime, we were finally finished for the day. I was hungry, but somehow the food didn't appeal to me. I was too tired to eat anything.

I sat down at the table with my team. They mumbled out hellos and I did the same. They all looked as tired as I felt. Well, except for Teal. She somehow managed to make tired look good. I'd found myself staring at her a lot today. A couple of times she'd noticed and given me a little smile. It was embarrassing and wonderful all at once.

I shoveled in a mouthful of pasta. It tasted blah, and it felt like work to chew and swallow.

"I can't wait to get to sleep," Devon said.

"Me too. I can't believe my aunt paid a lot of money for me to be tortured," Thomas said.

"Your aunt?" I asked.

Thomas looked embarrassed, like I was asking something I shouldn't be asking. Finally he spoke. "I live with my aunt and uncle."

"I live with my aunt and uncle too," I explained.

"That's a strange coincidence," he said. He looked relieved. "I've lived with them since I was five. They're like my parents."

"I don't mean to make this even stranger, but I live with my grandparents," Devon said.

"We all have dead parents?" I asked.

We looked at one another and nodded, and then I remembered Teal. "No, Teal lives with her mother."

"During holidays. Maybe we're the team of broken toys," Teal said.

"What?" Devon asked.

"Maybe they put us together because we all come from different sorts of families," she suggested.

I shook my head. "If that were the case, Ashley would be with us. She also lives with her aunt and uncle."

"That is so strange," Teal said. She looked directly at me. "How do you know about Ashley?"

Now I felt embarrassed. "I was talking to her after the test was finished, and she told me when we were eating breakfast together."

"You shouldn't talk to the enemy," Teal said. "Especially one who beat you on the test."

"She killed everybody on that test!" Devon said. "Well, except Houston."

Ashley had the top mark at 91. I was next at 89. Nobody else scored higher than a 70, and a whole lot of people had marks in the 30s and 40s. The instructors had posted everyone's scores on a big board for us to see. I couldn't remember not scoring tops on any

test. Ashley had beaten me.

She was smart and she was able to run, but it wasn't like either of those was a fair contest. She was dressed for the run, and she had been getting extra tutoring for calculus and algebra. If I'd had help like that, I would have beaten her easily. But I hadn't, and I wouldn't. Ever. She'd been driven here in a fancy car, and I'd walked from the airport, carrying my stuff in a beat-up old bag. Nothing was ever really fair.

The instructors had also announced the team scores. Our team was in first place, and Ashley's was in second. Still to be revealed were the scores for the rockets we'd built and launched that afternoon. We were going to be scored on our knowledge of rockets and technology, the height our three-stage rocket had obtained and how long it had been in the air. My team had done well, I thought, but there was no telling how well the other teams had done.

Despite being bone-tired, I'd found it pretty cool to build something that big. Each rocket was over six feet tall and had a camera on board, so we were able to see our rocket blasting off, hitting the top of its journey and then parachuting back down to Earth. Watching on that camera, I couldn't help thinking about what it would be like to be on a real rocket traveling into orbit. Or even beyond.

We'd had a lecture about the Mars mission as well. It wasn't like there was anything that I already didn't know. I was fascinated by it and I'd read anything and everything there was to know about it. If everything went well, it would happen within two years. Some experts thought it would be sooner than that but the government was being very secretive about the whole thing. The first crew—they were talking about six or even seven members—would be leaving on a one-year or longer journey to Mars. The flight itself could be five or six months long but if they wanted to "burn" more fuel it could be as little as ninety days. They'd already sent two unmanned supply ships—of six that were being sent—that had successfully landed on Mars. They were stocked with food and water and other things the astronauts would need when they reached the planet and to get back home at the end. It was all so exciting, amazing and, well, terrifying. How brave would those people have to be to do that?

"I'm too tired to eat anything more," Thomas said.

"Eat up. You need food in your system," Teal said. "There's no telling what's next."

"What's next is going to bed and sleeping until the morning," Thomas said.

"That's assuming they're not going to get us up again in the middle of the night," Teal replied.

"They wouldn't really do that, would they?" Devon asked.

They all looked at me.

"I have no idea," I said. "But maybe we better finish eating and get to sleep. And if there is an alarm, please bring your shoes this time."



I mushed up the pillows, trying to get comfortable. I'd have thought a place as expensive as this would have better pillows and softer beds. I'd dropped off the instant my head hit the pillow just after nine, but here it was, three in the morning, and I'd woken up with my head filled with things to think about. The camp, the things we'd done—and Teal. I couldn't get her out of my mind.

She was sort of like a unicorn. It sounded stupid to even think that. I'd never met anybody like her. She was bright and bold, and she really seemed to like me. Why did she like me so much? I was smart, I knew that, but I wasn't anywhere near in her league.

I heard a noise. A gentle tapping. I sat up in bed. Was I imagining it or—it came again. It sounded like it was coming from my door.

Then I had a terrible thought. This couldn't be another drill, could it? They weren't getting us up again. More tapping.

I flicked on the bedside lamp and climbed out of bed. I had been so tired I'd basically passed out and was still wearing my blue camp jumpsuit and shoes.

I opened the door slightly, and Teal brushed by me and into the room. She closed the behind her.

"I was starting to think you were too sound asleep to hear me. I couldn't risk knocking any louder or somebody else might have heard. I think I got here without being seen," she said.

"But why are you here?"

"I want to show you something."

"Right now?"

"Up on the roof."

"You want me to come up on the roof with you?"

"You don't have to come with me if you don't want to."

"No!" I exclaimed—much too loudly and enthusiastically. "I'm coming."

"Of course, we'll get in trouble if we get caught," she said.

"Then let's not get caught."

She offered me one of those wonderful smiles. It didn't matter if we got caught. It didn't matter if she suggested we jump off the roof when we got there. I was going with her.

We went into the hall. I quietly closed the door behind me.

She put her face up close to my ear. I could feel her breath. I could smell her. "We have to avoid the security cameras. Stay with me." She reached out and took my hand.

We moved down the corridor and she pointed out one of the cameras mounted on the ceiling. It was facing the other direction. She went to it, reached up and slowly tilted the camera so it was aimed higher, almost right at the ceiling.

"If we stay low and against the wall, we can avoid being seen on it." She let go of my hand, dropped down and started crawling. I did the same. We turned the corner and entered another corridor. She stood up and I followed.

"No cameras in this section, but there's one up ahead that I can't get to without it seeing us. It's aimed in this direction."

"Then what are we going to do?" I whispered. Why was I whispering? Did I think the cameras could hear us?

"This." She reached back around the corner, and we were thrown into darkness. "You turn out the lights."

She took my hand again. I wished she'd let me know when she was going to do that. My palm was sweaty. She led me down the corridor through the darkness and stopped at a door.

"This is the way to the roof."

She opened the door and, still holding my hand, pulled me through. I made sure to close the door behind me. She led me up a flight of stairs. It got lighter with each step we

climbed, and then we reached the roof.

It was flat, the surface was covered with gravel that was pressed into tar and it crunched under our feet as we walked. She continued to hold my hand and led me over to the side. Above us were a million little lights twinkling in the sky. With the extra light, Teal was more visible. She was, well, beautiful. And she was holding my hand. We stopped at a ledge, a wall that marked the edge of the roof. We'd stopped moving, but she was still holding my hand.

"Do you like the view?" she asked.

In front of us were the other buildings of the camp and beyond that the ocean. It was dark and ominous-looking, but there were a few lights out there, probably ships, and the smell of the salt was unmistakable.

"How did you know about getting up here?" I asked.

"I don't sleep that much, so I went exploring. When the alarm went off last night, I was up here. I thought I'd triggered it. Scared me to death."

"That's why you had your slippers."

"That's why. Isn't it nice up here?"

"Really nice."

"Can I tell you a secret?" she asked.

"Well, sure, of course."

She didn't continue right away, and I thought she was rethinking telling me. And then she spoke.

"I don't like closed-in spaces," she said.

"Like tunnels or caves?"

She visibly shuddered. "I don't even want to think about *those*. I mean like small rooms and even airplanes. They make me itchy inside, like I'm going to suffocate. I'm happiest when I'm outside, like now."

"But you had to take a flight to get to space camp, right?"

"I *can* do it. I do it all the time. I just don't like it. I get it from my mother. Strange how people call her a jet-setter yet the only way she can get on a plane is to have something to ease her nerves. Speaking of which, do you drink?"

"Everybody drinks—wait. You mean, like, alcohol?"

"Yes, like alcohol. Like this."

She let go of my hand and pulled a little metal container from her pocket. It was a flask. My uncle had one. It was silvery and small and flattish and caught some of the light. She extended it to me.

"You do drink, right?" she asked.

"Of course." I had had a few sips of wine at a family gathering and drained a beer that my uncle had left. Both had tasted bad.

"Take a swig. It's cherry brandy."

I took the flask and brought it to my lips. It burned a path down my throat. I worked hard not to cough or gag.

I handed it back to her and she took a much longer sip.

"I guess you want to know why I have alcohol?"

“Some kids at my school drink,” I said.

“Lots of kids at my school do a lot more than drink. Rich kids with lots of money and not much supervision, well, that can lead to a lot of trouble.”

“You seem to have turned out all right,” I said.

“All right? Is that how you see me? As just all right?”

“I...I...um...no.”

“Because I didn’t bring you up here because I thought you were just ‘all right.’ ” She took my hand again. “Have you thought about kissing me?”

I laughed. “Well, yes.”

“Do you want to do more than just think about it?” she asked.

She leaned in closer and I leaned in and closed my eyes and—

“Who’s out here?” a voice yelled out.

Twelve

Bright lights flashed in our faces. I brought a hand up to shield my eyes. Rather than thinking of how much trouble we were going to get into, I just thought, *Why couldn't they have waited another few seconds, so we could have kissed?*

"What do you think you're doing up here?" an angry male voice called out. There were two men.

"Houston, is that you?"

"Yeah...Stan?"

"One and only."

He came closer. The second guy was his buddy Jake. They aimed the flashlights down so they weren't in our faces anymore.

"Who's your friend?" Stan asked.

"This is Teal."

"Houston, what brings you and your *friend* up to the roof in the middle of the night?" Stan asked.

"We just wanted to get some air."

"And some privacy. You can leave us now so we can have that privacy. Thank you, and good night," Teal said.

Stan turned to the other guard. "Goodness, somebody thinks she's in charge."

"I'm sorry," I said. "We're both sorry. We didn't know we were doing anything wrong."

"We *weren't* doing anything wrong," Teal snapped.

"But now that we know we shouldn't be up here we'll just go back to our rooms and go to sleep. Thanks, Stan."

"If it were up to me, that would work out just fine. But you triggered a sensor that set off an alarm in the control room. That's why we were sent here to investigate."

"Couldn't you just tell them it was a raccoon or something?" Teal asked.

"That could cost us our jobs. Sorry."

My heart sank. "What happens now?"

"We bring you to the security office and our boss decides. Again, really sorry, but it's out of our hands."

"I understand, I guess."

"But maybe do one thing," Stan said. "Why don't you put away that flask, and we'll pretend we never saw it."

Teal had been trying to hide it—clearly not well enough. She shoved it into her pocket.

"Thanks, Stan," I said.

"Least I could do for a cheesehead," he said. He pulled out a package of gum and offered us both a piece. "Let's hide your breath as well."



Teal and I sat in two hard metal chairs in the little windowless office. The security chief had spoken to us for fifteen minutes and then left. That was almost thirty minutes ago. A couple of times I'd drifted off to sleep and snapped awake, not sure for a few seconds what was happening. How much trouble were we in? Were we going to be kicked out? I'd go back to Wisconsin, to our little house, my little room, and start working with my uncle. The worst thing was how my aunt and uncle would feel. I knew they'd be disappointed in me. I'd had this amazing chance and I'd blown it. And I hadn't even had the chance to kiss her. Wait, we were alone...Okay, now that was truly stupid.

I heard the door open, sat up straighter and turned around, and—it was Ashley! She was in her pajamas and looked like she'd just been shaken awake.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I have no idea. They woke me up and brought me here. Why are you two here?"

I was embarrassed to tell her.

"They caught us up on the roof, and the security guards brought us here," Teal said.

"That explains the two of you, but I was just sleeping," Ashley replied.

"You must have been doing something wrong," Teal said.

"Nothing. I didn't do anything wrong."

She took the empty seat beside me. We stopped talking. I figured we were all tired and a little bit scared of what was going to happen next.

"It's all going to be fine," Teal finally said.

"Fine for you," I said under my breath. I hoped she hadn't heard me.

"And what does that mean?" she asked.

Obviously, I hadn't said it quietly enough.

"It's just, well, they're more likely to kick me out than one of you two."

"And why do you think that?" Teal asked.

"I didn't pay anything, so it's not like they have to refund any money," I explained.

"I didn't pay anything either. I'm on a scholarship," Ashley said.

"So am I," Teal said.

"But...I just thought you'd both paid," I said.

"Because you don't think we're as smart as you?" Teal asked.

"No, it's not that—"

The door opened again, and I fantasized briefly about making a run for it. And then, as I saw who had walked in, I wanted to run even more. Dr. Phillips led the way, followed by Sergeant Miller and then Colonel Sanderson. They wouldn't wake up any of these people unless something serious was about to happen.

The colonel took a seat on the edge of the desk right in front of us. The other two grabbed chairs and brought them over to flank the desk and face us.

"Just so you know, I'm not any more pleased than the three of you are to have this meeting in the middle of the night," he said.

"Actually, this timing might even be better if we're going to circumvent the full procedure," Dr. Phillips said. "Or do you think longer is needed to make a decision?"

“No. Three days is enough,” Colonel Sanderson replied.

I felt a wave of nausea wash over me. They *were* kicking us out.

“It was all my fault,” I said.

“What was your fault?” Colonel Sanderson asked.

“Everything. The roof. I asked Teal to go up on the roof with me. And Ashley, her and me fighting—she didn’t do anything wrong. It was me being difficult, so there’s no reason to make her leave.”

Colonel Sanderson turned to Sergeant Miller. “You really had him pegged right.”

“He’s a natural leader. It’s one of the things that marks him as one of the top candidates,” Sergeant Miller replied.

“All three of them are a cut above the other camp participants,” Dr. Phillips said.

A cut above? What did he mean by that?

“The only problem is the interaction between the three of them,” Sergeant Miller said.

“Can you expand on that?” Colonel Sanderson asked.

“Ashley and Houston don’t seem to get along,” Sergeant Miller said.

The colonel snorted. “Have you ever met an astronaut who didn’t think he was the alpha dog in all situations?”

Both Sergeant Miller and Dr. Phillips laughed.

“Matter of fact, Skip Morrison and I practically came to blows during training, and then we had a couple of yelling matches up on the space station. Do you know how many times I wanted to punch that guy in the face? Astronauts don’t have to love each other, just get along.”

“And that is the other end of the equation,” Dr. Phillips said. “Apparently Teal and Houston like each other too much.”

I felt my face get warm and, I assumed, red.

“Okay, that’s a little more complicated. Is that why the two of you were alone up on the roof in the middle of the night?”

We were on the roof because Teal didn’t like being inside her little room, but I couldn’t say that. Besides, he wasn’t wrong about how we felt about each other. Well, at least how I felt about her.

“Neither of us could sleep. We wanted some air. We’re teammates,” Teal said. “Nothing more, nothing less.”

We were about to kiss, weren’t we? I hadn’t imagined that, had I?

“I think there is more, but nothing that can’t be worked through,” Colonel Sanderson said.

“Does that mean can we stay at camp?” I asked.

“No, camp is over for all three of you.”

My heart fell to the floor. We were being kicked out.

“But couldn’t we get a second chance—couldn’t *they* at least get a second chance?” I pleaded.

“Houston, you’re not being offered a second chance. You’re being offered a *better* chance.”

“I don’t understand,” Teal said.

“That’s to be expected, because in the first place you didn’t understand what was really going on. You all thought this was a space camp,” Colonel Sanderson said.

“But it is,” Ashley replied.

“No,” Colonel Sanderson said. “This has not been a space camp. It’s been a space *audition*...and you three are now being offered the chance of a lifetime.”

Thirteen

I came out of the plane's washroom. I had been lucky enough to keep the contents of my breakfast in my stomach all the way to the restroom. I'd vomited into the toilet, flushed it down and then washed my face and rinsed out my mouth. I didn't think anybody had heard me gagging, thanks to the exhaust fan. For very different reasons, I didn't want Teal or Ashley or Colonel Sanderson to know how the ride was affecting me. I was embarrassed.

I walked up the aisle, past the empty seats and to the front, where Teal was sitting in one of two adjoining seats and Ashley was in one of the two seats facing us. Her eyes were closed, and it looked like she was sleeping. There were seats for thirty on the jet, but we were the only passengers. Well, we and Colonel Sanderson, but he was up in the cockpit.

I sat down beside Teal. She looked at me and gave a little smile.

"Are you doing all right?" I asked.

"I'll be more all right when the plane lands and I can be outside. I wish this plane was bigger," she said. "It's stupid that I get thrown by being in—"

I put a hand on her knee to silence her. I gestured toward Ashley.

"Don't worry," Teal said quietly. "She's asleep. She's been softly snoring sometimes, and there's even been a little drool coming down her chin. I'm not sure I'd make the best astronaut," she added. "What about you? Are you feeling better? Is your stomach all right?"

Obviously I hadn't been as quiet as I'd hoped.

"What a pair we are. You get anxious in small places, and I get sick to my stomach every time I'm on a plane," I said.

"Every time?"

"This is only my second plane ride."

"We'll be there soon."

"I've never been to Florida before, have you?" I asked.

"My father had an estate in Key West. I spent part of the Christmas holidays there with my parents before they separated."

The door to the cockpit opened and Colonel Sanderson appeared. He took the empty seat beside Ashley, so he was facing Teal and me. Ashley's eyes were still closed.

"Ashley, you should wake up now," Colonel Sanderson said.

"I wasn't sleeping," she answered, and her eyes popped open. "I was just listening. It's amazing what you can learn by just listening."

She gave a smug little smile. She had heard everything we'd been talking about.

"We're going to be touching down in about thirty minutes. I'm sure you must have more questions."

"I don't think ten hours would be long enough to answer all of my questions. This is all almost unbelievable," I said.

"It is," Ashley confirmed. "Who would have thought we'd actually be going into space?"

"You *could* be going into space," Colonel Sanderson said. "There are two intensive months of training, assessment and evaluation that will decide that."

"It's amazing to even be considered," I said.

"*Considered* is the key word. There are a lot of people, even at the highest level of NASA, who think sending young people into space is a terrible idea," Colonel Sanderson said.

"Are you one of them?" I asked.

"When I was first told about this proposal, I thought it was pretty well the stupidest thing I'd ever heard of. What sort of idiot thinks we can train kids to go into space?"

"It does sound pretty wild," I agreed. "And now?"

"If long-range space travel is to become a reality, it's eventually going to involve young people, children and possibly even babies."

"If this goes forward, if we're allowed into space, how long will we be up there?" Teal asked.

"That will be determined by your physical and psychological reactions to space."

"Could you explain that a bit more?" I asked.

"The whole purpose of this is to see how prolonged time in space affects young people. You'll be extensively tested and monitored each day. If there are any negative consequences, you will be returned to Earth immediately."

"That means that we could be up there for only a few days," Ashley said.

"More likely it would take at least two weeks to register anything negative, but your stay could be as long as six months."

"Six months?" Ashley asked. "But what about school?"

"You'll have a far better and different education than any other ninth-grade student has ever experienced in the history of education. As well, your ongoing education is completely guaranteed," Colonel Sanderson said.

"And that's even if we don't get selected to go into space?" Teal asked.

"Even if you wash out of the training," he said. "Full tuition, a full-ride scholarship, including living expenses, to any university in the world," he said. "If your marks are good enough to go to Princeton or Harvard or Oxford, then that's where you'll go."

"That's amazing," I said.

"I know that money means more to you, Houston, than it might to the girls," Colonel Sanderson said.

"It means a lot to me too," Ashley said. "I've been working for a full scholarship since first grade."

"I've never really thought about it," Teal said. "And that probably means you're right."

"Oh, I forgot to mention that we didn't just contact your guardians and parents to get permission. We've also arranged for them to join us."

"My aunt and uncle are going to be there?" I gasped.

"They and the Boo-Boos," Colonel Sanderson confirmed.

"And my aunt and uncle as well?" Ashley asked.

"Yes, but without your cousins." He paused. "But, Teal, I'm sorry to say that your mother won't be coming."

Teal didn't look sorry, or upset, or surprised. Her expression didn't reveal any reaction.

"She informed us that she had other commitments and won't be able to be here when the other families are, but she hopes she'll come to see you in the next few weeks."

Teal didn't answer or react.

"Any more questions at this time?" Colonel Sanderson asked.

"All three of us were on scholarships at the camp, so I was wondering if it was just us you were considering," I said.

"Almost half the students in this session, and many in other camps, were on scholarship. It was our way of getting the best candidates there for evaluation and ultimately selection."

"And how exactly were all of us chosen to begin with?" Ashley asked.

"We had a whole selection team at work. You'd be surprised how much information is already gathered and available. We simply had to tap into those databases. We were looking for young people who had demonstrated high skill levels in mathematics and technology and who had expressed some interest in space, engineering or aerospace technology."

"I'm wondering about the training we're now going to receive," Ashley said.

"It will be identical to the training received by all astronauts, but you'll also be receiving additional support and accommodations to make it possible for you to succeed."

"I meant the time. I'm wondering about the length of the training," she said.

"I know that two months seems like a long time, but—"

"No, that's not it," Ashley said, cutting him off. "It's not long enough. Astronauts train for years to be part of a mission, and we're only going to have two months?"

"You'll be members of the mission, but you're obviously not expected to have the same responsibilities as the adult team members," Colonel Sanderson explained. "You'll be team members but also subjects of an experiment into how extended time in space affects people of different ages."

Then something dawned on me. "You're not just the head of this program. You're going to be traveling into space with us."

"Why would you think that?" Colonel Sanderson asked.

"I've read about how they're thinking of sending older people into space, especially on one-way trips that aren't coming back to Earth. You'll be a test subject as well, right? You'll be going back into space."

He smiled. "That is part of the plan. At least, assuming I pass the training."

Somehow having him along made it seem better, safer.

"I have a question about the camp, about the people we left behind," Ashley said. "Now that you've selected us, will the camp go on?"

"Exactly the same except without the three of you being part of it."

"Then they'll know about us being selected?" she asked.

"No, they'll know nothing about that or the real purpose of the camp. That remains top secret right now."

"But they'll definitely notice that we're not there anymore," Ashley said.

"About thirty minutes ago Dr. Phillips brought the remaining campers together to explain your absence."

"And what were they told?" I asked.

"That the three of you were asked to leave the camp because you failed to follow the rules against fraternization."

"What does that mean?" Teal asked.

"You and Houston were found alone together on the roof in the middle of the night."

"But we didn't do anything!" I protested—mainly because we were interrupted pre-kiss.

"How does that explain my not being there?" Ashley asked.

"During the discovery of Teal and Houston, we also found out that he was in your room the night before that," Colonel Sanderson explained.

Ashley's mouth dropped open. She looked shocked—and a little disgusted.

"Why couldn't you just tell them the truth?" she demanded.

"As I said, this whole project is top secret. Your parents have been sworn to secrecy."

"But why?" Teal asked.

"We're trying to protect you and your privacy."

"It's not just about protecting us," Teal said. "It's also protecting the agency, isn't it?"

He smiled. "Both of those reasons. Teal, you've had some experience under the media spotlight. I know you and your mother were often chased by paparazzi."

She didn't answer.

"When this is finally announced, there will be a tidal wave of media and social media attention. The longer it's kept secret, the better. We'll be landing soon. Are there any more questions?"

"Exactly how many people are going to be on this mission?" I asked.

"Six people, and potentially three of us will make up the team."

There were four of us, so what did *that* mean?

"There will be a maximum of two young astronauts sent into space."

"One of us isn't going?" Ashley asked.

"Even if all of you qualify, only two of you will be sent into space, and the third will remain in the program, as part of the research."

Ashley and I exchanged a look. We were still in competition.

"And I will only be going into space if at least one of you is going. While I'm leading this project, I'm dependent on one of you qualifying to travel into space."

"Then you really want this to work," Ashley said.

"I'm totally committed to getting at least one of you up there, but it's not up to me." He paused. "It's up to the three of you."

The plane banked hard to the left, and I felt my stomach start to shift to my throat. I let out a little burp. The *Fasten Seat Belt* sign came on. We were getting ready to land.

Fourteen

There was a loud noise, and I sat bolt upright. I felt a rush of panic. What was that noise, and where was I? It came again. It was a knock on the door of my room at the Space Training Facility. We'd each been assigned a room. A really nice room. I'd gone in to lie down for just a bit and had fallen asleep.

I jumped out of bed and ran for the door, throwing it open. There were my aunt and uncle, and before I could even say hello, the Boo-Boos bounced through the doorway and into me, practically knocking me over.

"Houston, Houston, Houston!" they screamed in unison.

I picked up Brett and threw him toward the bed. For a split second I was afraid I hadn't tossed him far enough, but he hit the bottom corner, bounced and rolled off the other side. Before I could react, he'd popped his head back up, laughing and smiling.

"Me next! Me next!" Dylan screamed.

I picked him up and threw him onto the bed a bit more carefully.

They both came running back for more, but were intercepted by their mother.

"Do you remember what happens if you're well-behaved?" Suzie asked.

They skidded to a stop. "We remember," Dylan answered.

"We'll be good," Brett said. "We want to go to Disney World."

"You're going to Disney World?" I asked.

"Three days. It was arranged by the people here," Suzie said.

"They paid for everything," Brad added. "Airfare, hotels, the rental car and even park admission."

"Am I going?" I asked.

They looked sheepish. "They said you wouldn't have time because you'd be starting your training," Suzie said. "But I promise we'll get you there as well. I don't know when, but it'll happen."

"Look, we're going to the Space Mountain ride. The kid is going to be on an actual space ride," Brad said.

"We're so proud of you," Suzie said and gave me a big hug.

"It's all pretty amazing, pretty unbelievable," I said.

She shrugged. "Not that unbelievable."

"You thought when I went away to space camp that I was going to end up going into space?"

"Of course not. It's just that if any thirteen-year-old on the planet was going to be selected to go into space, it only makes sense it would be you," she replied.

"There's no guarantee. I have to pass training, and there are only two spots for the three of us."

"Brad, how about if you take the twins out for a walk while I talk to Houston?"

The two boys jumped up and ran for the door, followed by their dad.

"This is pretty exciting," Suzie said. "And we're so proud of you."

"You said that."

"But we'd be just as proud of you if you decided you didn't want to do it," she said.

"Or if I flunked out?"

"Yes, of course, but you're not going to flunk out. You're the smartest kid I've ever met."

"Wait until you meet Ashley and Teal." I was only half joking.

"I just want you to know that this is your choice. You could leave right now with us and go to Disney World."

"I want to stay. I want to try."

"That's great." She gave me a big hug. "I just wish we could tell everybody about what you're doing," she said.

"That doesn't matter." Especially if I washed out of the program. "But if it works out, everybody will eventually know."

She laughed. "Everybody in the entire world."

She was right, and suddenly the thought of going home did appeal to me. But I wasn't going anywhere right now.



I finished my lunch, and one of the waiters whisked away the plate. It seemed like there were almost as many serving staff as there were guests in the little dining room. There were my family and me, Ashley and her guardians and Teal. The Boo-Boos were going full-out. They were loud and in constant motion. They were hyped up on sugar, still on a Disney World high, and to top it off, they hadn't had much sleep the night before. It felt like there were four of them instead of two.

My aunt Suzie looked embarrassed and spent most of the meal trying to contain or quiet them. My uncle Brad didn't seem to notice. He was enjoying the meal and talking continually about how much he had loved Disney World, describing the rides in detail.

Teal seemed amused by the Boo-Boos. I wondered if she was enjoying the distraction, because it took away from the fact that nobody was here for her.

Ashley's guardians weren't so amused. Actually, they didn't even seem that happy to see her. I didn't know who I felt worse for—Teal or Ashley. Ashley and her aunt and uncle were off to the side, having what looked like a serious conversation.

"I'm not looking forward to the plane ride with these two," Suzie said as the Boo-Boos ran past her.

"They'll do fine," Brad said.

"It's not them I'm worried about, it's me. I might have to throw one of them out of the plane so I don't go crazy."

"They're cute," Teal said.

"They're lots of things, but cute is not one of them," my aunt responded. "Now you, you're downright beautiful."

Teal smiled.

"Don't you think so, Houston?" Suzie asked.

I felt a flush come over my body. “Um...um...”

“Don’t embarrass him,” Brad said.

Thank goodness he’d interrupted.

“I’m not trying to embarrass him. How could he not think she’s beautiful? The boy isn’t blind or made of stone.” She paused. “Teal, you really do look familiar, like a person on TV or a movie star or...wait, there’s a fashion model who looks just like you.”

“That’s it!” Brad said. “A *Sports Illustrated* model.”

It probably was her mother, but Teal wasn’t saying anything.

Colonel Sanderson entered the room, and we all turned to look at him.

“Hello, everybody. You only have two minutes to finish up your goodbyes,” he said.

Suddenly I felt sad to know my aunt and uncle were leaving. I knew I could always go with them, but, of course, I wouldn’t.

“Give your Houston a hug,” Suzie said to the Boo-Boos.

They both gave me a big hug. They released me and without saying another word headed for the door.

“Talk to you later, Houston! Be good!” Brad yelled as he ran after them.

“I guess I better get going.” Suzie gave Teal a big hug. “It was a pleasure to meet you. You take care of Houston, and I’m sure he’ll take care of you.”

My aunt then hugged me. “If you need anything, if you need to leave, if there are any problems, we’ll be back right away to get you away from here,” she whispered in my ear.

“You won’t need to do that. I’ll be fine.”

“I know, but if we have to, we will. We’ll talk. Often. Okay?”

“Okay.”

She gave me another little squeeze and then released me and turned toward Colonel Sanderson.

“And them going into space isn’t going to hurt them, right?” Suzie said.

“They will be monitored daily,” he said reassuringly. “If anything negative is detected in their testing, they’ll be returned to Earth almost immediately. You have my word,” he said. “I’ll treat him like he’s my family.”

“Then I guess this is goodbye for now.” She gave me a smile and a wave, then turned and left. I was going to miss her. I was going to miss them all.

“All right. It’s now time to meet the rest of the mission candidates,” Colonel Sanderson said.



There were twenty-two of them. They were all dressed in the same blue flight suit the four of us wore. There were twelve men and ten women. During the brief introduction each one had talked about their training. In each case it was extensive. They all had postgraduate degrees, mostly PhDs, in such disciplines as engineering, astrophysics, medicine, aeronautics. More than half were navy or air force members. They blurred into one big bundle of doctors, colonels and captains. Each one was impressive, serious, intimidating and scary. What were we doing in the same room with these people? They must have all been thinking the same thing about us.

Most had been training for this in one way or another for their entire lives. Some had

been considered for previous missions over the past few years, and eight of them had already been into space. I guess if you counted Colonel Sanderson, then nine had been. Four candidates had been on multiple missions, including the guy who was talking right now, who had been in space three different times.

Also present was the director of the facility, Dr. Fernandez. She was running the meeting.

"As we are all aware, the next mission will take place in a few months," Dr. Fernandez said. "And the six members of that mission will be selected from those present in this room." She turned to face Colonel Sanderson and the three of us. "Colonel Sanderson, would you please introduce our three newest candidates?"

"I'll let them introduce themselves. Houston, would you like to start?"

"Um, sure, I guess I can. I just don't know where to begin."

"You could start with when you were born," one of the male astronauts said.

"Yes, it wasn't like it was that long ago!" another said, and everybody laughed or chuckled.

"Houston, please go on," Colonel Sanderson said.

"Houston, we have a problem," another said, to more laughter.

"Yeah, like nobody has ever said that one before," Teal said. "I'm sorry—I thought we were supposed to be the children in the room. Anybody else have something clever to say before my friend speaks?"

Teal was fearless. There was suddenly silence in the room.

"And if you're going to make a joke, could you at least get the wording right. Nobody actually said that, right, Ashley?" Teal asked.

Ashley wasn't any less brave. She grinned. "That's right, Teal. The actual words spoken by Jack Swigert were 'Okay, Houston, we've had a problem here.' "

"And then when NASA asked them to repeat the transmission," added Teal, "Jim Lovell said 'Ah, Houston, we've had a problem.' " Teal shook her head. "You people should really learn your space history."

"And you may have noticed too that none of us interrupted you," Ashley said. "You should aim to at least be accurate if you can't be polite or mature."

There were murmurs all around the room. The adults were not pleased.

"Everybody, please, settle down," Dr. Fernandez said. "Houston, go ahead."

"My name is Houston. Houston Williams. I guess I understand why some of you think it's strange, even funny, that we're here. None of us saw this coming. I just graduated from eighth grade." I paused. "You all must be pretty impressed, right?"

Everybody chuckled, but it was a nice chuckle. They were laughing with me.

"And just so you know, I wasn't named after the city or the space-program location, but because Whitney Houston was my mother's favorite singer. If I had been born a girl, I would have been named Whitney. It makes the name Houston sound a *whole* lot better."

A couple of smiles and more chuckles.

"I'm wondering, could you raise your hand if you always wanted to be an astronaut when you were growing up?"

First one hand went up, then another, and another, until it was more than two-thirds of the people in the room.

"Can you imagine what it would have been like if you were here when you were our

age? Wouldn't that have been amazing?"

Around the room people nodded their heads and made side comments to others sitting near.

"I'm scared. You probably would have been scared too. And I don't mean just about going into space, but about being in this room. You're all heroes. We're just kids. Maybe we shouldn't even be in the room."

"But we are," Teal said defiantly.

"Yes, we are in the room and we hope we can show you we deserve to be here. Thanks," I said.

Colonel Sanderson slowly clapped his hands. Teal did the same, and then somebody else joined in, and another and another and another.

I sat down and Teal got to her feet. She looked as cool and comfortable as she always did. The girl was unflappable.

"I didn't want to be an astronaut. I didn't even want to go to space camp. But I'm here, and I'm going to give it everything I have. I'm going to be a good team player and help my friends, and all of you, become the best that you can be. If there's anything any of you are having trouble with, feel free to ask me for help."

More laughter, but it was more nervous than friendly. She'd called them out.

Teal went on to give her background. There were things I didn't know, like she was born in France and she spoke three languages—French and Spanish as well as English—and she'd trained as a gymnast before she had some knee problems that ended her career. She also told them about her mother being a famous model. I hadn't expected that, but judging from the way people perked up their ears, and some nodded, it was probably a good thing.

"Thank you," Teal said, and she took a seat.

That just left Ashley. She got to her feet and started talking. She sounded nervous, but why wouldn't she be?

"I am Ashley Ling. I also am starting ninth grade in the fall—right after I return to Earth from space. I have specialized, university-level training in advanced calculus and algebra. My interests include astronomy and astrophysics."

Interests. Why hadn't I thought of that? Then again, being interested in skateboarding and basketball probably wouldn't have scored that many points in this room.

"I've wanted to be a doctor and an astronaut. It's an honor to be here among so many people who have accomplished so much. I always dreamed I'd be in a room like this, getting ready for this. I just couldn't believe that it could possibly happen this soon. Thank you for accepting us."

She sat down, and there was applause. Dr. Fernandez shook her hand as she sat down. There was no question who had "won" this first meeting. She was already ahead in this race, as well.

Fifteen

We stood in our bathing suits—official NASA suits that even had the little emblem—on the deck of the pool. This was the second time in the past two weeks that I'd stood on the side of a pool. It wasn't just a pool, though. It was the biggest indoor pool I had ever seen. It was long and wide and deep. They told us it was forty feet deep at this end of the pool. Peering through the distortion of the water I could see what we were told was an exact, life-size copy of part of the International Space Station—where we were going to live if we made it to space.

I could make out blurry shapes of astronauts in full space suits below the surface, doing simulated work on the simulated space station. We'd be doing that eventually, but there was a hitch. They didn't have space suits in our sizes. It would be at least two weeks. It seemed scary enough to think about going down there to train—so what was space going to be like?

I felt a shiver go through my whole body. What was I doing here? Technically I knew why we were here. We'd been training for the past hour to prepare us. Just the four of us—Colonel Sanderson was along with us—and the two instructors on the deck and the two scuba divers sitting on the edge of the pool.

One of the instructors got ready to test the machine again. It was an airplane cockpit—well, the cut-off front of an airplane, at least. It sat at the top of a set of rails connected to the flight of stairs we'd have to climb to get inside of it. We'd spent the morning in class with the two instructors telling us what was going to happen. We'd listened, learned and then taken a written test.

“Clear!” one of the instructors yelled.

The machine slid down the rails, splashed into the pool, throwing water into the air, and then flipped upside down and quickly sank toward the bottom. My stomach flipped along with it. The next time it went down, one of us would be inside.

“The secret is to remain calm as you sink,” the instructor said. “You can't force open the door until the pressure between the outside and inside has neutralized. Houston, how is the pressure neutralized?”

“By the inside being flooded with water.”

“Exactly. And do you undo your safety harness before that happens?” he asked. “Ashley?”

“No. The harness holds you in place until you're floating inside the cockpit. When the chamber is almost completely filled, you push the center release button, pop off the cockpit lock and swim to the surface.”

He nodded his head. “I think you three have absorbed the lesson. Any questions?”

“Why are we pretending to be in a plane crashing into the ocean when we're heading into space?” Teal asked.

“Does somebody else wish to answer that?”

“At splashdown, at the end of our space trip, we could end up underwater,” Ashley said.

“And?” the instructor asked.

"And you need to see how we handle pressure," I said. "To see if we'll panic."

I was scared, and I wondered how Teal was feeling. She had to be close to the edge, but she wasn't showing it to anybody.

"Colonel, didn't you once put a plane into the drink?" the instructor asked.

He held up two fingers. "Twice. The first was the worst. Always is."

"Who's first today?" the instructor asked.

"How about if I show them how it's done," the colonel suggested.

He climbed up the steps with the instructor. As he walked, the two divers put on their masks and descended into the pool. The cockpit broke the surface and started back up the rails to the top to meet the colonel.

"How are you feeling?" I asked Teal.

"How do you think I'm feeling?"

"It'll be okay," Ashley said. "Do you want to go next? Or you can go last, or whatever you want."

"Not next. Definitely not next."

"I'll go. I'll show you how easy it is," I said.

"Easy?" Teal asked.

"Okay, maybe not easy, but doable. Besides, I want to get it over with."

"Ready?" the instructor yelled, and the colonel, who was already inside the cockpit, gave a thumbs-up.

There was a loud buzz, and the sled shot down the track and hit the water, throwing a spray up into the air. We all gathered at the edge of the pool and peered down. A rush of bubbles and foam obscured our view. Off to the side we could see the two divers. What we couldn't see was the colonel.

And then the canopy opened up. The colonel got out and quickly rose to the top, breaking the surface. He took a few strokes that got him right to the side of the pool. I felt so relieved.

"It's sort of refreshing," he said as he pulled himself up and out of the pool.

He leaned in closer to us. "Look, this is one of the toughest things you're going to do in your training."

"Then why are they starting with this?" Teal asked.

"I think they're trying to decide quickly if any one of you is up to the task," Colonel Sanderson said.

"Next!" the instructor called out.

The machine was already coming back up the rail. It would soon be at the surface and then up by the platform, ready to launch—or, I guess, to crash.

I heard myself speak. "It's me. I'm going," I said. I sounded scared. I *was* scared.

"If an old man like me can do it, it'll be a walk in the park for somebody young and fit like you," the colonel said.

"I can go instead, if you want," Ashley offered.

I shook my head. "Better to get it over with, but thanks for offering."

I climbed up the steps. The tower was shaking a little bit. Or was it me shaking? The instructor was waiting for me at the top.

"Congratulations on being the youngest person ever to do this," he said.

"That's great. Do I get a trophy?"

He chuckled. "Are you worried?"

I wanted to say terrified, but I didn't. "A little."

"Remember that worry is a close relative of panic. There's no need for you to be worried. You know, in all the years we've done this, we've never lost anybody."

"That's good to know."

"Of course, a couple had to go to the hospital, and one almost drowned, but we did revive him."

"So much for you making me feel less worried," I said.

The cockpit locked into place at the top. It was still dripping water. The instructor opened up the canopy.

I climbed in. It wasn't very big. The instructor did up the straps. One came up between my legs and two went over my shoulder. They all came together in a circular disk in the middle of my chest. This was both the lock and the release.

"Just do it the way you were taught. Wait until the canopy fills with water before you release the lock for your straps. And then hit the latch for the canopy. Exhale some breath. The bubbles rise up. That's the direction you want to go. Just follow them to the top. Got it?"

"I got it."

He gave the straps one more tug and then closed the canopy. I looked through the glass, down the rail and into the pool below. It looked so *far* below.

"Ready?" the instructor yelled.

I gave a thumbs-up like the colonel had. There was a loud buzzing sound and then I dropped, my stomach rose, and I closed my eyes. I hit the water, and the straps dug into my chest as I flipped. I was hanging upside down as the whole contraption sank below the surface. Almost instantly water started seeping into the canopy.

Water was falling from the top, dribbling down my side and starting to accumulate in the bubble of the canopy—right by my head. My head and face and mouth were going to be submerged long before the rest of me. I tried to force myself to calm down...while I was hanging upside down and water was rushing into the canopy and threatening to drown me like a rat. Water kept flowing in, faster and faster, as I sunk lower and lower. There was enough water. It was time to at least get out of the harness.

I reached for the release button with one hand and braced myself for the fall with the other. I clicked it open and tumbled down head first into the accumulating water. There was nothing to do now but wait for the canopy to fill up further. If this were a real plane, I would have continued to sink until I got out. Here I was only fifteen or twenty feet below the surface.

I closed my eyes and tried to calm my racing heart. I took a deep breath, and another and another, and there was a tapping sound. My eyes popped open. One of the scuba divers was just outside the canopy. He gave me a thumbs-up and smiled. The second diver came up and did the same. I smiled back.

It made me feel much better and calmer. I wasn't that far underwater. I was in a pool. I had two personal lifeguards who were certified Navy SEALs. The only thing safer was getting to the surface. Maybe it was time.

I fumbled around under the water, searching for the canopy release. I found it. I took a

deep breath and pushed down, and it popped open and I dropped down. I was free of the cockpit but still way below the surface. I kicked my feet hard and rose and rose, then burst through the surface. I was greeted by a round of applause, and Colonel Sanderson offered me a hand and pulled me up to the deck.

“Congrats,” he said. “Pretty easy, right?”

“Not as hard as I thought it was going to be.”

“Who’s next?” the colonel asked.

“I can go if you want,” Ashley said to Teal.

She shook her head. “I’ll go next.”

“Are you sure?” Ashley asked.

“Positive. No problem.”

She sounded so confident. She looked so confident. Then again, she always presented herself that way, so I didn’t know if it was how she was really feeling or if she was just putting on a brave front.

The cockpit broke the surface on its way back up to the top of the tower.

“It’s going to be super easy for you. It’s just a dip in the pool, and you’re a better swimmer than me.”

“Much better.”

“You know I’m not planning on going into space without you,” I said.

“You’re not going anywhere without me,” she said.

“I’m counting on it. You’ve got this.”

I stopped, and she continued up to the top. The machine was back in place. The instructor was standing beside it, the canopy open, waiting for Teal. I watched as she calmly climbed inside and he strapped her into place. I heard as he gave the last-minute instructions and then closed and locked the canopy. She looked over at the instructor, and they exchanged a thumbs-up. She looked confident. The buzzer sounded, and she dropped toward the pool.

Sixteen

Two of the other astronaut candidates came toward us down the corridor.

“Remember, don’t let them see you sweat,” Teal said quietly.

We’d agreed that they weren’t going to hear us complain or cry, no matter how bad it got. And it had gotten bad. Teal had struggled getting out of the cockpit. Ashley had done pretty good.

“We were wondering how our young friends found the training today,” the woman said. The name tag on her flight suit said *Jennings*.

“Nothing special,” I said.

“Didn’t you do the mock plane into the pool today?” the man asked. His name was Sutcliffe.

“Yeah, this afternoon. I’d almost forgotten about it,” Teal said.

Their fake smiles were replaced by looks of surprise.

“We were told it was going to be hard, but really it was sort of a joke,” Teal said.

“Like a roller coaster,” Ashley added.

“A small, slow roller coaster, or more like a water-park slide,” Teal said.

“A very short water slide,” I said. “Twenty-five feet isn’t much of a slide.”

“And none of you had any trouble?” Sutcliffe asked.

I shrugged. “Not sure how much trouble you could have. Did one of you find it hard?”

“Of course not!” Jennings snapped.

“We are both Air Force pilots,” Sutcliffe said. “We’ve flown aerial maneuvers at Mach 1.5 and handled a g-force of over seven.”

That was impressive. I wanted to say *wow* and maybe salute them or something, but I knew that wasn’t how we were playing this.

“That’s only slightly more g’s than the Tower of Terror,” Teal said.

Everybody looked confused.

“It’s a roller coaster in Gold Reef City in South Africa,” she explained. “I’ve been on it a couple of times.”

“Being on a roller coaster is different than flying a plane.”

“And probably a lot different than being in space. Have either of you been in space?”

“We hope to have our tickets punched in the next mission or two,” Sutcliffe said.

“So basically, you’ve been in space exactly the same number of times as us,” Teal said.

Neither of them looked too pleased. Sutcliffe was getting red in the face.

Colonel Sanderson appeared in the corridor, coming toward us.

“Good evening, Colonel Sanderson, sir,” Sutcliffe said.

“Good to see you are keeping my crew company,” the colonel said.

"They were just telling us about their day," Jennings said.

"They did well. All of us did well. The medical was the hardest part."

"That's right," Jennings said. "You four are going to be pricked and prodded all through the training and the flight." He smirked. "Assuming you make it."

"We'll make it," Ashley said. She turned to the colonel. "How many times have you been in space?"

"This will be number five."

"And how long ago was the last time?" Sutcliffe asked.

"So long ago that you were probably in high school."

"I just mean that you'll find so much has changed," Sutcliffe said. "Equipment, procedures, protocols."

"Do you think I'm too old to go to space?"

"I wasn't trying to imply that," Sutcliffe said.

"Of course, you were. Have the guts to say what you're thinking. Maybe you're right and maybe you're wrong. Either way it won't be you deciding. You'd best remember that if your name wasn't printed on your flight suit, I wouldn't know who the hell you are, because so far all you've done in the space program is take up room." He turned to Jennings. "That goes for you too. You two could be cashiers at Piggly Wiggly for all I care. You show disrespect for me again and I'll wipe the floor with both of you. Do you understand?"

"Um...yes," Sutcliffe mumbled.

"It's yes, *sir*," the colonel snapped.

"Yes, sir," they said in unison.

"Now, you are dismissed."

They both came to attention and offered a salute. The colonel hesitated before reluctantly saluting them back. They turned and hurried away.

"Maybe the equipment has changed, but some things are the same. Everybody thinks they should be the top dog," Colonel Sanderson said. "Tomorrow we'll have a chance to show the two of them what we're made of."

"What are we doing?" I asked.

"They're just going to have us all sit down in a room."

"That doesn't sound so bad," Ashley said.

"Actually, it's more like a chamber. A hyperbaric chamber. You're going to find out about the force of the atmosphere and how you react to it being removed. The technicians are going to subject us to the atmospheric conditions in high-altitude and low-oxygen situations."

"Like a capsule leak?" I asked.

"Exactly," he said.

"They're going to take away your oxygen to see how your brains work when you suffer decompression. But really, nothing to worry about. The worst thing that can happen is that you're going to pass out. It's going to be a piece of cake."

Seventeen

We stood in line with twelve other astronauts, including our dear *friends* Jennings and Sutcliffe, listening to the instructors give final advice. Nobody seemed concerned at all. Then again, some of these people—including those two—had been in real planes at high altitude. They would have gone through this in their flight training, as well as in real life. My hands were sweating.

“You will all take a seat on one side of the chamber or the other, filling each spot. As soon as you sit, you are to put on your helmet and mask. There is a radio built into the helmet for us to continue to communicate,” one of the two instructors, a man named Captain Collins, said. “We will also go from person to person to adjust the mask and make sure it fits properly.”

He didn’t look directly at us, but everybody knew who those words were meant for.

“I think some of us are capable of adjusting our own masks,” Sutcliffe said, and there was assorted chuckling.

“We must have us a hotshot pilot here who doesn’t need help. Is that who you are?” the other instructor, a woman who had introduced herself as Colonel Rodrigues, asked.

“No, ma’am, I just—”

“If you think this training is unnecessary for somebody of your *exalted* status and experience, then you can bug out and get yourself a cup of coffee and let me get on with training mere mortals. Is that what you want to do?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Anything that you, or anybody else, want to add?”

There was no reply.

“Now, if I can continue. If the mask is not on correctly, you will be subjected to high-altitude, low-oxygen conditions prior to the commencement of the exercise. If that is the case for your entire time in the chamber, you could experience enough oxygen deprivation to suffer brain damage.” She paused. “And quite frankly, I’ve always thought that anybody who wanted to be strapped to a rocket and sent into space had some preexisting brain damage.”

There was a chuckle throughout the room. I didn’t find it that funny.

“Now, into the chamber.”

We filed in. I was right behind Teal, with Ashley behind me and the colonel behind her. I hesitated for a split second before I stepped up and over the high metal edge, ducking my head. The big metallic door had a small porthole and a gigantic crank in the middle. This wasn’t really a chamber as much as a bank vault.

“Fill in every seat,” Captain Collins barked.

We sat down on one side of the chamber as others took seats next to or across from us. Each group was staring at the other, only a few feet apart. My luck—I was staring directly at Sutcliffe. Was that just chance?

The instructors went from person to person, helping put on and adjust masks. It was my turn. Colonel Rodrigues took the mask, positioned it into place over my mouth and

nose and tightened the straps, snugging it in place.

“How does that feel?” she asked.

“Good,” I said through the mask.

“I’m turning on the oxygen feed. Just breathe in and out naturally.”

Instantly I could feel the air flowing into the mask.

As the instructors continued, I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing, which sounded loud and mechanical. It reminded me of something—I just couldn’t think of what.

“And the first person to say, ‘Luke, I am your father,’ will have his mask ripped off,” Captain Collins said.

Of course! *That’s* what it reminded me of ! The deep breathing and the way it echoed slightly in my ears. We were all a bunch of Darth Vaders.

“You feeling anxious?”

My eyes popped open. It was Sutcliffe. He was looking right at me. There was probably a smirk on his face under the mask.

“Why would you think that?” I asked.

“Your eyes were closed, like you were trying to fight off a panic attack.”

“I was actually almost falling asleep because I was bored,” I said.

Teal offered me an upraised hand, and we exchanged a high five.

Finally, the last person was masked up and checked by the instructors. Both of them had also put on masks.

“You might have noticed by the popping in your ears that we have already been reducing the atmospheric pressure in the room,” Colonel Rodrigues said. “So far, the pressure change is equivalent to an airplane taking off and gaining a few thousand feet in elevation.”

I didn’t really remember my ears popping on either of my two flights.

“As we continue to climb to twenty thousand feet, the oxygen level will fall to slightly less than half of what’s available at sea level,” Captain Collins said. He turned to the glass panel and spoke to the technicians sitting behind it. “Get us to that level.”

“You will continue to feel the effects of the decrease in your inner ears as we continue to climb,” Colonel Rodrigues added. “We are now at the equivalent of twelve thousand feet. Does anybody know what the significance is of that altitude?”

Almost every one of the astronauts raised a hand, as did Ashley. The instructor pointed at her.

“We have moved from high altitude to very high altitude, and there is a much greater chance of suffering from altitude sickness at or above twelve thousand feet.”

“Excellently put,” the instructor replied. “Does anybody know what those effects are?”

It was my turn to join the hands being raised. The colonel had made us stay up late the night before, studying. Memorizing wasn’t a problem for me—once read, information was always in my head.

“Houston,” Captain Collins said.

“Joint pain, dizziness and headaches, being really tired—fatigued—tingling or numbness, especially in arms, legs, feet and hands, weakness, and difficulty in thinking clearly.”

“I couldn’t have said it any better. We are now at the oxygen level you’d find at the top

of Mount Kilimanjaro. Could you all please remove your masks.”

I took another deep breath and then a second and a third. Everybody else was in the process of removing their masks. Reluctantly I did the same.

“Make sure you leave the mask close to your face,” Colonel Rodrigues cautioned.

I nudged mine slightly higher on my neck.

“If you were standing on the top of that mountain, at just under twenty thousand feet, this is the level of oxygen that would be available. Take in a deep breath.”

I did as I was told. Neither of the instructors had taken off their masks. They were still getting the right amount of oxygen.

“The biggest difference between that and this exercise is that if you were climbing the mountain, it would have taken you between three and seven days to reach this height. Your body would have had time to acclimatize to the changing oxygen level. Here the effects will begin to appear more quickly. You’re going to take a test. Take out the iPad in the slot beneath your seat,” Captain Collins said.

I reached down and pulled it out. It was state of the art, brand-new and already on. I hit the screen, and a test appeared.

“The questions are not difficult. Straightforward mathematics and logical reasoning questions. You may begin,” he continued.

What was straightforward and logical to an astronaut with a PhD compared to me, Ashley and Teal could be very different. Ashley may have had tutoring, and I could try my best, but—wait. The first question was just two-digit multiplication. I quickly completed the question. It was so simple I didn’t even need to double-check it. I went from question to question. They were getting harder, but nothing so complicated that I needed to worry.

“You might have noticed that the air is getting thinner and thinner,” Colonel Rodrigues said. “You have probably also noticed your first physical or physiological response to the reduced oxygen.”

I realized my fingers were feeling numb, and I was starting to feel pressure in my head. It was like my eyes were bulging out.

“You have two minutes to finish your test. Please continue.”

I looked back at the sheet. Again, the question was nothing too complicated...although I seemed to be having trouble with division, and it was difficult to touch the screen in the right way to register the answer. I tapped the screen hard. My fingers felt thick and awkward.

“Put your iPads back where you got them,” Captain Collins said.

Had it really been two minutes?

I tried to put the iPad away and it dropped to the floor. I grabbed it with both hands and fumbled around until it slipped back into the slot.

“Everybody, on your feet,” Colonel Rodrigues called out.

I stood up and tumbled back down. I was surprised and embarrassed. With both hands I pushed off and got to my feet. I was swaying and unsteady. My whole body felt heavy, and my feet were like blocks of cement.

“Now you’re going to partner with the person across from you,” she said.

I looked over and realized who it was. I’d somehow forgotten that Sutcliffe was across from me.

“We want you to play patty-cake,” Colonel Rodrigues said. She and the other instructor

started to clap their hands together and then with each other. “Just like this.”

I clapped my hands and then reached across and tried to touch Sutcliffe’s hands. I hit one and missed the second. That struck me as funny. We clapped a second time and tried to meet in the middle. We hit this time.

“And please recite the rhyme. ‘Patty-cake, patty-cake, baker’s man, bake me a cake as fast as you can...’ ”

I started to try to recite the words she had said. My tongue felt as thick and awkward as my fingers and hands. Sutcliffe wasn’t doing much better. I was aware enough to know he was slurring his words as well.

A red light started flashing in the corner, and there was a strange beeping.

“That alarm signals that we have reached the death zone. We are at the equivalent of the top of Mount Everest—just over twenty-nine thousand feet. A person who is acclimatized can last at this oxygen-deprived level for up to fourteen hours. You, without that preparation, can go approximately three to five minutes before you will faint.”

“What?” I mumbled, but I didn’t think they heard me.

“We need you to monitor your reactions as you play, and decide when you need to put your mask back on,” Colonel Rodrigues said.

I was going to grab my mask right away but couldn’t because of Sutcliffe. I couldn’t do it before he did. This wasn’t a contest, but, well, it was. Maybe it wasn’t smart and I was only thinking this way because my brain wasn’t getting enough oxygen, but I wasn’t going to let him win.

We kept clapping and patting each other’s hands, but now neither of us were saying the rhyme. I couldn’t seem to remember the words.

I noticed that some of the people to my left had already sat down and put their masks back on. I glanced to the right. Teal and her partner had taken a seat. Ashley was still standing, and Colonel Sanderson had sat down. I hadn’t expected that. There were still people on their feet, but more had taken a seat. I wanted to count, but somehow that seemed like it would be too much work or too complicated.

“I don’t want to be dealing with fainting people hitting their heads,” Captain Collins said. “There’s way too much paperwork involved. Think about getting your masks back on.”

I tried to look at Sutcliffe. I was having trouble focusing, but his eyes looked glazed.

Both instructors were now standing right beside us.

“Are you two all right?” Colonel Rodrigues asked me.

I understood the words but wasn’t sure what they meant.

“You’re the only two left. Put your masks back on.”

I sort of understood, but I didn’t know how to find my mask, and even if I did, how could I get the strength to—

Sutcliffe collapsed, and Captain Collins strained to catch him and cushion the blow on the way down. He grabbed Sutcliffe’s mask and put it on his face.

I felt hands on me, pushing me to my seat. It was the colonel – I couldn’t seem to remember her name. She grabbed my mask and pushed it over my mouth.

“Deep breaths. Take deep breaths.”

I did as I was told. The air almost felt like liquid that I was drinking instead of simply breathing.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“Are *you* all right?”

“Probably better than you. Congrats on being the last person to put on the mask.”

I thought that was probably a good thing. I just wasn’t sure what to think. I wasn’t sure I *could* think. There was a powerful pain in the front of my brain, and I was feeling shaky and tingly all over. Oh yeah—that’s how I was supposed to feel.

I felt a tap on the leg and looked over. It was Teal. “Way to go. Way to show him. Way to show them all.”

Eighteen

I held up my hand and looked at the little clip on my finger. It was measuring the oxygen in my blood. How amazing. How wonderful that they didn't have to stick another needle in me to find out. I'd also had blood drawn, swabs taken from the inside of my mouth, and a separate neurological assessment.

The doctor stood just off to the side, looking at the monitor. Colonel Sanderson was standing right beside him. The doctor didn't look much younger than the colonel.

"How's my boy doing?" Colonel Sanderson asked.

"His oxygen levels have returned completely to normal."

"That's good to know," I said.

"All three of the young people had the quickest return to normal levels of all the participants in the exercise."

"Is that because we're younger?" I asked.

"That's my hypothesis, but you have to realize, nobody has ever put three young people in a decompression chamber before."

"Then there's no previous research you could draw on?" Colonel Sanderson asked.

"Nothing."

"Sounds like a research paper to be written," Colonel Sanderson said.

"I was thinking about that, but of course I can't really even discuss it with any of my external colleagues until this project is announced," the doctor said. "But it seems clear that their age is a positive factor."

"Speaking of age, how was my rebound rate?" Colonel Sanderson asked.

"You were in the bottom third."

"But not the bottom."

"No, but you really can't expect a better result than that at your age."

"At my age? Huh! What am I, five years older than you?"

"Seven, and I'm not the one going into space," the doctor answered.

Colonel Sanderson gave the doctor a slap on the back. "You got both parts right. You're not going to space, and I am." He paused. "You've seen nothing that would be a problem, correct?"

"Correct, but if I did, you know I'd have to report it. Friend or no friend."

"I understand...I guess."

"Things have changed since we began in this business. Everything is monitored, recorded, analyzed. There are no more gray areas. Everything is black and white."

"It's certainly different. These astronauts are, well, not like us, not like back in the day," Colonel Sanderson said.

The doctor laughed. "Back then you were all a bunch of cowboys."

"That was us, space cowboys. We were test pilots and daredevils."

"Not to mention hell-raisers," the doctor said. "Not that you didn't have the right stuff. You were just different than today's breed."

"How do you describe them?" I asked.

"Well, there's hardly a person here who doesn't have an advanced postgraduate degree in one thing or another. They're more like scientists, academics or technicians."

"I think back in the day we were mainly selected by being the first ones to raise our hands. Maybe they thought we were the most expendable if something happened," Colonel Sanderson said.

"Don't sell yourself or your generation short," the doctor replied. "Every astronaut who follows owes you a debt. They're only here because of you. You're history."

"I think that's the problem. Some of the people in this program want to treat me like I'm a relic from the past. I've even had some of them try to explain things to me that I was part of pioneering."

"I get some of that too. They look at the snow on the roof and don't understand the fire in the furnace."

"I may be history, but I'm also trying to be the present."

"Is that why some of them resent us?" I asked.

"It doesn't matter what they think or want they want. We're going to prove them wrong." The colonel paused. "The way you proved them wrong. I loved when that joker collapsed and you were the last person standing."

"Is he all right?" I asked.

"He's under observation for twenty-four hours. Standard protocol whenever somebody loses consciousness and cracks their head on the way down," the doctor replied.

"Maybe he will think twice about being such a jerk next time," Colonel Sanderson said. "I might have to take a swing at him."

"It would be better if you didn't," the doctor said.

"We had more than a few fistfights with each other back in the day," Colonel Sanderson said.

"That wouldn't fly today. It would be seen as a sign of mental instability. A physical altercation could get you expelled from the program."

"I'll keep my hands in my pockets. Now, are you through with Houston?"

"All ready to go."

"Good. We need to get a big meal into you tonight because you're going to skip breakfast tomorrow."

"I am?"

"Believe me, you're not going to want to have anything in your stomach."

I didn't like the sound of that.

"What's going to happen? What are we going to be doing?"

The doctor raised his hand. "I think I know. The reduced-weight flight."

Anything to do with flight was what I was dreading.

"Of course, most people know it by a different name," the colonel said. "Unless that's changed too."

The doctor shook his head. “Some things remain the same, and the Vomit Comet is one of them.”

My feelings went from dread to complete fear. I already knew about the Vomit Comet.

Nineteen

The plane lifted off, and I felt it in my stomach and in my head. I hadn't eaten any breakfast. I hadn't had anything to drink either. Not even water. Nothing into my stomach meant nothing to come back out of my stomach. That wouldn't control the nausea, but it could stop me from puking.

Teal sat in the seat beside me. Ashley and Colonel Sanderson were across the aisle. There were six rows. Along with the four of us were ten other astronauts, four instructors, a video photographer and a still photographer. Just what I wanted—pictures of me being nauseous.

Both Sutcliffe and Jennings were among the “real” astronauts. They were nicer to us today, talking to us, being helpful and even complimentary. As I looked back, I caught Sutcliffe's eye, and he gave me a little smile and a thumbs-up. I nodded in reply and gave him a fake smile in return. The colonel had told us that the astronauts all knew team cohesion would be a factor in choosing a mission crew, so it was to their advantage to make it look like they actually liked us and could work with us.

Teal leaned over. “It's a pretty short flight. Only ninety minutes from start to finish, so only eighty more to go. This is the perfect situation for you.”

“Perfect for me how?”

“This is the Vomit Comet. A whole lot of people are going to be sick to their stomach.”

She was right about that. According to our instructors, one-third of the people in this plane were going to be ill, and another third were going to become violently ill. I'd have company.

“Besides, aren't you just a little bit interested in finding out what weightlessness feels like?” she asked.

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

The plane was climbing quickly, and my ears were popping. I tried to convince myself that being aboard an airplane was just like being in the decompression chamber. I focused my mind on the information and training we'd been given prior to boarding.

We were heading to thirty-two thousand feet. Well above the artificial level we'd gone to in the decompression chamber. Here, of course, the atmosphere and oxygen levels would remain constant and stable. Nobody was going to pass out from not having enough oxygen. What we'd be lacking was gravity.

One of the instructors got to his feet. “Good afternoon,” he said. “It's time for us to get ready for the first parabolic arc. Please move to the front of the craft.”

All around me seat belts unsnapped and people got to their feet. Teal leaned over and unclicked my belt. We both stood up. Still holding on to the sides of the seats, we pulled ourselves forward to the open area at the front of the plane, where all the seats had been removed and the floor, walls and ceiling were padded. The instructors moved effortlessly, while the rest of us—even the real astronauts—struggled to move forward. We were climbing at almost a forty-five-degree incline—that was basically four times the angle of a plane during normal takeoff. I could feel the weight in my legs and arms. They told us we'd be experiencing 2 g's—we'd feel like we weighed twice as much as we normally did

—during the climb periods.

The instructors positioned themselves along the walls. They secured themselves by clicking into metal clasps, so they wouldn't float away when we hit the weightless zone. I pulled myself to an empty spot, dropped to my knees and then, like everybody else, lay down on my stomach. Teal settled in on one side of me, Ashley on the other.

"We're getting close to the top of the arc," the instructor called out.

It was the first of forty arcs. That was how many times we were going to go up to thirty-two thousand feet and then drop down to twenty-four thousand feet. As we got close to each arc, the plane would start to decelerate and those of us inside would continue upward—feeling zero g's. As the plane dove back down, we'd be weightless as the plane fell faster than us. Finally, twenty-five seconds later, we'd catch up to the plane and be pinned against the floor as it started up again.

"Are you starting to feel it?" one of the instructors asked.

I was feeling the pressure easing off. It wasn't like there was somebody sitting on my back. I almost felt normal. Wait, not normal. I felt lighter than normal.

I gave myself a little push off the floor. I rose easily. It was like doing an effortless push-up. I pushed harder and rose higher into the air, and I kept rising!

There was a chorus of voices around me—people cheering and screaming and oohing and aahing. I glanced around. Everybody except the instructors—who were tethered to the supports—was flying!

Teal let out a little scream and then did a somersault. It was amazing but more adventurous than I wanted to be. Instead I put my arms in front of me, Superman-like, and just hovered in the air.

"Oooofff!" I gasped as something struck me in the side.

"Sorry!" Ashley yelled out. Her foot—her flying foot—had kicked me as she soared forward. She was moving her hands and feet like she was swimming through the air.

"Get ready for touchdown!" one of the instructors called.

There was a collective groan as people either landed or crashed to the floor. My landing was soft. It was the people doing flips and spins who experienced the hardest landings.

"That was amazing," Teal said.

"It was almost unbelievable."

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Not bad. Better than some."

Three people were heaving up into airsickness bags.

I looked around for Ashley. She had propelled herself toward the back of the plane. She gave me a thumbs-up, and I returned it.

The plane leveled out. We were now at the bottom of the loop—around twenty-four thousand feet. That didn't last long, and the plane started the next climb.

"Can you feel the pressure building again?" I asked.

Teal nodded.

"It's hard to even imagine what we're doing. Who could have predicted any of this?"

"Nobody. None of this was predictable. All we can do is sit back and enjoy the ride," she said.

We came to the top of the arc again, and I started floating above the floor for another thirty seconds.

More cheers came from around the plane, and I realized one of them was from me. Teal was right—there was nothing to do but enjoy the ride.



I stepped through the door and onto the stairs. The air smelled good. Fresh and free of puke. More than a third of the people on the plane had gotten violently ill. Unfortunately, that included both Teal and Ashley, although with nothing in their stomachs, they hadn't vomited. Most shocking, it hadn't included me. I'd gotten through it better than most.

My legs were shaky, and I put a hand on the railing to steady myself until I reached the tarmac. I stopped, took a deep breath and turned to look at the other people coming down the stairs. Teal descended slowly, leaning heavily on the railing for support. Ashley, right behind her, didn't look much better, but they were both trying to put on a brave front.

Colonel Sanderson was suddenly at my side. "You did well, son."

"All three of us got through it."

"Well enough to continue forward," he said.

I gave him a questioning look.

"Each step, each exercise, could eliminate one or all of you. You all passed this one."

I knew what he was saying was true, but it wasn't reassuring. One more training exercise down, but how many still to come?

Twenty

The three of us stood alone on the pool deck, wearing our space suits and holding our helmets. Those would be fitted and sealed before our little elevator ride down to the bottom of the pool. Each suit had been custom-made. They were perfect replicas of what we'd be wearing in space—assuming we got to space—except they were designed to seal out water. The suits were specially weighted so that once we entered the water, we would experience as close to zero-gravity conditions as possible. The elevator was at one end of the pool and the Space Station was at the far end. We'd be taking a "spacewalk" along the bottom of the pool to get there once the elevator touched down.

Teal was particularly quiet this morning. That was strange.

"You doing okay?" I asked her.

She nodded but didn't answer and didn't look any more at ease.

"You're going to do great," Ashley said. "You're the only one of us with scuba training."

"This isn't like scuba diving," Teal replied. "In scuba diving it's just a mask, flippers, a tank and your suit. It's almost like flying, you're so free."

I leaned in close and lowered my voice. "And this feels contained because you're sealed in, is that it?"

"Once the helmet goes on, it'll be like being inside a coffin," she said.

"Or a small spacecraft," Ashley suggested.

"A skin-tight spacecraft. I don't even know why they're making us do this. It isn't like we're going to have to do any EVAs," Teal said.

She was right. There was no way we were going to be involved in any extravehicular activities. To do that, you needed much more extensive training than we were going to receive.

"This is just *stupid!*" she snapped.

"Just think of it as a dip in the pool," I said. "No, wait, it isn't a pool it's the...it's the... NBL."

Teal gave a little smile.

"Would it really take that much extra time to just call it the neutral buoyancy lab?"

"Do you remember how big it is?" Ashley asked. "Because I know that numbers aren't your strength."

Now it was my turn to smile.

"It contains 6.2 million gallons of water. It is as big as ten Olympic swimming pools. It is 202 feet in length, 102 feet wide and 40 feet, 6 inches deep. Look at it—it's enormous!"

Even more amazing than the size of the pool was what was in the water. There was a complete replica of part of the International Space Station. The whole station was as big as a football field. We were going down there to pretend we were in space instead of at the bottom of a pool. I could see three space-suit-clad astronauts already working below the surface.

"It's going to be like being in zero gravity," I said.

"I think he means microgravity," Ashley said.

Both Teal and I broke into laughter. Ashley had brought us back to space camp, when we first met one another. We'd had Ashley wrong back then, or maybe she'd changed. Actually, we'd all changed.

"Are you going to be okay?" I asked Teal.

"I'll try."

"Do or not do. There is no try," I said, trying my best to sound like Yoda.

"I'll do it."

"Good. No washouts allowed," Ashley said.

The timing was perfect. The two space-suit technicians walked across the deck toward us. While we'd been talking, the lifeguards—six Navy SEALs in scuba gear—had slipped into the far end of the pool.

"Time to seal the suits," one of the technicians said. "Any questions?"

"Not really a question, but can you put mine on first, please," I said.

"And mine on next," Ashley added.

Without saying a word, we were both trying to give Teal a little more time to see that it was all right.

The technician took my helmet from me and placed it over my head. She turned it to the side and there was a distinct click as it locked into place.

A voice came into my ear. "Test, test. This is Mission Control. Do you read me, Houston?"

"Yes, loud and clear," I replied.

"Can you feel the airflow?" she asked.

"Yes. Definitely." A stream of air was coming into my helmet, rushing by my face and onto the face shield.

Then I heard Mission Control talk to Ashley, and she replied. We were all connected. I turned and watched as the technician took the helmet from Teal and lowered it over her head.

"Mission Control to Teal. Is your com working?"

"Loud and clear," she said. Her voice was calm. No hint of panic or worry, although with Teal that didn't mean much.

"Proceed to the elevator."

We shuffled across the deck and onto the metal grating of the elevator floor. It had side panels, a bar at the front and no roof. At least Teal wouldn't feel enclosed by the elevator. We each grabbed hold of the railing of the little cage as it shuddered, and then we started our slow ride to the bottom of the pool.

I looked down as we descended. My feet and then the top of my legs were submerged. "Everybody doing good?" I asked.

"Affirmative," Ashley said.

"Yeah, just great," Teal replied.

"Just like scuba diving," I said as we continued to sink down.

Nobody answered. Actually, there was no background chatter from Mission Control.

Usually there was a buzz of conversation.

“Control, can you hear me?” I asked.

There was no response.

“Control?” Teal asked. There was a tinge of anxiety in her voice, something I was sure nobody but me—and maybe Ashley—could detect.

Again, no response. I felt my own anxiety start to rise. I couldn’t allow that to happen. I took a deep breath before I spoke. “I don’t know why we’ve lost them, but we can still communicate between ourselves, and that’s what’s important, right?”

Both Teal and Ashley answered.

“Besides, just because we can’t hear them doesn’t mean they can’t hear us,” I suggested—both to reassure them and warn against saying too much.

The water was hitting me around the chest now. Soon we’d be submerged completely.

“I’m sure they’re working on fixing it right now,” Ashley said.

We continued our ride down, and the water now reached the face shield of my helmet. I felt like I was in a reverse fishbowl—air inside and water outside.

“There’s a little bit of water coming into my helmet,” Teal said.

“What?”

“There’s water.”

“Are you sure?” Ashley asked.

“I think I know water,” she replied.

I turned so I could look into her shield.

“I can’t see anything. Maybe it’s just sweat or—”

“It’s not sweat, and it’s getting worse. I can feel it. It’s going down my neck and into my suit—and it’s coming faster.”

“Control, can you hear me!” I called out. “We have a problem. We need to get to the top again!”

The elevator continued down. If the technicians heard me, they weren’t doing anything in response.

“Wait, I’m taking on water too!” Ashley yelled. “It’s streaming in. I thought it was the sound of the air coming in, but it’s water, and it’s starting to fill up my helmet.”

“It’s not draining into your suit, like with Teal?”

“Negative. Negative!” Ashley yelled.

“Control, you have to bring us back to the surface!” I exclaimed. I was trying for calm, but I know my voice didn’t sound that way.

We continued to sink down. I looked at the metal side rail of the elevator. There were three buttons. One was red. That must mean stop, or warning, or something. I leaned in. There was a symbol, but in the water, looking through my shield and feeling a rush of emotions, I couldn’t make it out. It had to be a stop symbol. I pushed it, hard, and the elevator jiggled and then shuddered to a stop.

I tried to get a closer look at the buttons. If one was for Stop, one of the other two had to be for Up. All elevators had an Up button. Nothing. No symbols. Both buttons were smooth. I pushed one and then the other. I held one down, hoping that might do something. It didn’t. I repeated the same thing with the other button, getting the same result. We weren’t moving.

"Where are the Navy SEALs?" Teal demanded.

"They have to be at the far end of the pool, or maybe they're still on the deck or...the water is coming in faster... I can hear it...it's splashing against my face. It's getting higher. The water is almost up to my chin," Ashley said.

Somehow, she still sounded calm.

"Can you move—shift around to get it to drain into your suit?" I asked.

"I've tried. It's not working. It's filling up my helmet. We have to do something and soon."

But what? I ran through the scenario. The simulated space station was at the far end of the pool. The other astronauts—and probably the scuba divers—were far away. We had no communication with Control. The elevator wasn't going down anymore, but it wasn't going up either. We were below the surface. But how far?

I looked up. It was hard to gauge the distance, but we hadn't sunk that far, had we? It didn't look like more than five or six feet.

"The water is just below my mouth," Ashley said.

"And I can feel it around my chest," Teal added. "It's filling up the suit. It will soon start filling my helmet and I'll—"

"Ashley, we're going to take care of you first," I said, cutting Teal off. "Teal, take her by the arm and hold her elbow."

"What?"

"Take her by the arm and elbow. We're going to lift her to the top, to the surface."

Teal didn't move. "Now!" I yelled.

"Oh...okay."

She shuffled over until she was on one side of Ashley and I was on the other.

"Ashley, when you get up above the water, grab on to the deck if you can. Teal, hold her arm and elbow."

I watched to make sure Teal was doing it and then did the same.

"Now on the count of three, Ashley, I need you to try to jump up, and the two of us are going to lift. Ready...one... two...and *three!*"

She rose and rose—and then came back down to the platform.

"I was almost there," Ashley said. "I almost broke the surface."

"Okay, this time we'll get you above the water. We have to lift and then shift. We'll push you up and then change our grips. Teal, we have to toss her up and then take her by the hip or even get under her feet."

There was no response from Teal.

"Teal?"

She still didn't answer, but I could hear something. She was quietly sobbing.

"Teal!" I screamed. "We need to do this, and we need to do this now. Ashley needs us. We'll take care of her, and then we'll take care of you. You'll both be okay. Understand?"

"Yes...yes...I understand. I can do it."

"Good. Now lift her!"

We lifted and tossed her higher and then shifted our grips. I pushed her hip and then her leg and then got right underneath her, so she was almost standing on top of my

outstretched arms.

"I'm above the surface!" Ashley yelled. "Now if I can just shift over, I can get out."

And then she was gone. Her feet were no longer in my hands, her legs no longer visible.

"I'm on the deck!" she yelled.

Almost at the same instant, two divers appeared. They grabbed on to Teal and took her toward the surface. Then the elevator, with me the only passenger, started back up toward the surface. My head broke through the water. Ashley was on the deck, surrounded by technicians, her helmet off. Teal was sitting down, and her helmet had also been removed.

The elevator got fully to the top and stopped. I stood there frozen, thinking about what had happened. If the elevator had been two feet farther down before I'd found the Stop button, we wouldn't have been able to heave Ashley to the surface. She wouldn't have gotten somebody's attention to save Teal. I would have stood by and watched helplessly as the two of them died.

I knew the details, the circumstances, of every incident in space travel that had taken a life. I could list off each and every single fatality in the history of space travel, from those who died in training to those who had perished during their missions. All the facts were in my head.

This was different. These were my friends. The possibility of losing them was not only real but had almost happened right here.

"This is Control." The message came through my com set.

Somehow, I could hear them now.

"Houston, this is Control. Can you read me?"

I took a deep breath. "Affirmative."

"You can exit the elevator and go onto the deck."

I held on to the railing and took a few hesitant steps. I was greeted by two technicians, who gripped both of my hands to steady me. I was feeling shaky.

There was a clicking sound—my helmet was being removed. Someone turned and lifted it, and I was free of it. I let out a deep sigh and a full body shudder. I realized I was soaked too—soaked in sweat.

Then I could hear Teal. She was crying. I wanted to comfort her, but there was nothing I could do. We were separated by our suits and the cluster of technicians who hovered around her.

I was hit by a sudden rush of anger. How could this have happened? How could so many technical mistakes have taken place? One mistake I could see, but this many? Why wasn't there somebody in the pool watching over us? The suit technicians hadn't stayed around to watch our entry. And where were the divers in the pool? How could Control not have monitored us and realized we'd lost communication? What were the odds of so many things going wrong in one exercise? Wait. Had everything gone wrong, or gone just like they'd planned?

Twenty-One

We sat at a metal table in a conference room. Teal was shivering, despite the room being really hot. Except for the table and chairs, the room was completely, starkly empty. The walls were painted an industrial white. A gigantic mirror took up half of the wall opposite from where we sat. It seemed strangely out of place.

I looked at the mirror. I looked at *us* in the mirror. We were three kids. Teal and Ashley and me. Teal had her head down. Ashley was staring off to the side. We looked smaller than how I pictured us in my head. Small and scared and out of place. Was I seeing us the way everybody else saw us all the time?

Teal let out a little whimper

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

She shook her head.

Ashley leaned in close to her. “Don’t let them see it,” she whispered, so quietly that I could barely hear her.

“I don’t care what they see or hear. We could have died!” Teal said.

“We both could have died, but we didn’t. And I was even closer to it than you,” Ashley added.

“We would have died—or at least one of us would have—if it weren’t for Houston.”

“Nobody was going to die,” I said. “I know that.”

“You can’t know that for sure,” Ashley replied.

Before I could answer, the door opened and in came the head of the Buoyancy Center, Dr. Glover, and Dr. Morano, the woman in charge of the design and the construction of our space suits. I was surprised that at least one of the suit engineers wasn’t with them. They took seats on the opposite side of the table from us.

Dr. Morano started talking. “I want to start by saying that I am truly sorry for what happened and that we’re working to—”

“Why would you be sorry?” I asked.

“We bear responsibility for accidents,” she said.

“And you’re saying this was an accident?” I asked.

“Perhaps Dr. Morano chose the wrong word. It was not so much an accident as it was unforeseen that not just one but two of our space suits malfunctioned at the same time,” Dr. Glover explained.

“Don’t forget about the fact that we lost radio communication with Control,” I said.

“Yes...that was possibly because the water shorted them out,” Dr. Glover replied.

“No water entered my suit, but I lost radio communication, so that rules out that theory,” I snapped.

“That was even more unfortunate.”

“It would be unfortunate if it wasn’t for the fact that it was all very deliberate,” I said.

There was a pause. Their expressions didn't change, but I could see in their reflections in the mirror that both Ashley and Teal looked concerned and confused about what I was saying.

"Are you telling me that two suits and three com-links all having problems at the same time was an accident? Is that the story you're trying to convince us of?" I questioned.

Dr. Glover opened and closed his mouth, but no words came out.

"Houston, what are you talking about?" Ashley asked.

"This wasn't a series of malfunctions. It was a test. They wanted to see our reactions."

"This was deliberate?" Teal asked.

Neither of them answered.

"Yes, so how about if we stop pretending," I said. "You're not fooling anybody."

And then I remembered something I'd seen on a TV police show.

"Who's behind the mirror?" I asked. "If you want to know how we feel, how we reacted, then come out here and be part of the conversation."

I slammed my hand against the table, and it vibrated. Ashley and Teal looked at me like I'd lost my mind. Had I?

Before I had a chance to doubt myself any further, the door opened, and Colonel Sanderson and a man I didn't know walked in. They grabbed chairs and wheeled them over to join the two people sitting across from us.

"Who is this?" I asked, pointing at the unknown man.

"I'm Dr. Almos, the director of Psychological Assessment and Services for the Center."

"What went on in the pool, it was a game you were playing with us, right?" I asked.

"Not a game. We were running a simulation to evaluate your responses to a critical situation."

"And that's why you tried to drown us? To test us?" Teal asked.

"As Houston noted, you weren't in real danger," Dr. Almos said and offered a weak smile.

"It felt pretty real to me," Teal snapped.

"For a simulation to have legitimacy, it has to be seen as real. Of course, if Houston saw through the simulation, then his responses would be invalidated."

"What?" I asked.

"If you knew it wasn't really a life-threatening situation, then your response would be less useful. Houston, when did it stop being real for you?"

"It was always real. I was trapped underwater, and my two best friends in the world were in danger of drowning."

"But when did you know it was a created crisis?" Dr. Amos asked.

"At the time I was too busy trying to keep us alive to think anybody would deliberately do something like that as a game. It wasn't until we were standing on the deck afterwards. I thought that this place was too efficient to allow that many things to go wrong at the same time."

"That was a reasonable deduction," he said.

"But I didn't really know for sure until you and Colonel Sanderson came into the room."

"And you knew about this?" Teal asked Colonel Sanderson.

He nodded. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you, because that would have ruined the validity of the simulation."

"We could have drowned," Teal said.

"We were monitoring everything, including your vital signs, so we could instantly respond if there was distress," Dr. Glover explained. "There were three Navy SEALs stationed just beneath the floor of the elevator."

"And while we simulated that you had no communication, we were listening to your conversations at all times," Dr. Amos added.

"And why was it my helmet and Teal's that filled with water, instead of Houston's?" Ashley asked.

"It was a random decision which two would have their helmets only partially sealed, but all three of you were being tested. Houston was equally a subject in this simulation."

"And we passed," Ashley said.

"It's not as simple as a pass or fail. We will have our team analyze the data and part of that is for us to now speak to each of you independently," Dr. Amos said.

"That's not going to happen," I replied.

"I don't understand," Dr. Amos said.

"We're a team. When you talk to one of us, you're going to be talking to all of us," I said.

"We will be talking to you all as a group at the conclusion of the individual meetings, but first we need to speak to each of you alone," Dr. Amos said.

"You tested us as a team, and you'll talk to us as a team and then give us feedback as a team," Ashley said.

"But we try to maintain confidentiality and—"

"We don't have any secrets from each other," Ashley said, cutting him off.

"None," Teal added.

"But that's not standard procedure," Dr. Amos said.

"There's nothing about us that's standard procedure."

I got to my feet. Ashley and Teal didn't hesitate. They got up as well.

"We're leaving," I said.

"When you're ready to talk to all of us together, we'll be ready to listen," Ashley added.

We walked over to the door, and I opened it, ushering the other two out and closing it behind me.

"You didn't need to do this for me," Teal said. "It isn't you two they have concerns about."

"You don't know that," I replied.

"Yes, I do. When we were in the pool, they were listening in. They knew I was panicking."

"You didn't panic. You were just, well, appropriate, given what happened," Ashley argued.

"Neither of you were scared," Teal said.

"I wasn't scared, I was *terrified*," Ashley answered.

“So was I,” I admitted.

“But neither of you acted that way. Houston, you figured out what to do.”

“That was because my mask wasn’t filling with water.”

“They heard everything we said. They know I don’t do well in closed spaces, that I’m claustrophobic.”

“We really didn’t say much,” I added.

“We said enough.” Teal paused. “Besides, it might all be for the best.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“What would I do if something happened while I was in orbit? I could die or get somebody else killed because I’d be too scared to think straight,” she said. “Maybe I should just quit.”

Ashley grabbed Teal by the hand and brought her to a stop. She then placed both her hands on Teal’s shoulders. “You’re not doing that.”

“You should be grateful. If I quit, you’re guaranteed to go into space.”

“It doesn’t guarantee anything except that you’re *not* going to space. I might not make it either.”

“Ashley’s right. You can’t control whether they decide to kick you out of the program. None of us can. But being kicked out is different than quitting. You’re not quitting.”

“Teal, you and Houston are the best friends I’ve ever had,” Ashley said. “I haven’t felt this close to anybody since... well...since my parents. We have to stick together as long as they’ll let us.”

Teal flung an arm around Ashley and then with her second arm pulled me into a group hug. I threw my arms around both of them. That was how I felt too. We were more than friends. More than a team. Whatever was going to happen, we were going to take it on together. They could tell us to leave, but nobody was going to quit.

Twenty-Two

It had taken almost three hours for them to agree to meet with the three of us together. We sat in the same room, waiting for the discussion to begin. I wondered if anybody was behind the mirror now or if we were alone.

The door opened and Colonel Sanderson walked in. He closed the door behind him and walked over to stand directly in front of us. "How are you all doing?"

"Is there anybody behind the mirror?" I asked.

"Nobody. That was pretty gutsy of you three to walk out."

"Gutsy or stupid?"

"Don't rule out the possibility that it could be both. We'll soon see."

"Does that mean you don't know what's going to happen?" Ashley asked.

He shook his head.

"Do you think they're going to kick us out of the program?" I asked.

"I don't think so, but I do know it would make a lot of people happy if they did," the colonel said.

"I can think of at least a couple of astronauts who would be thrilled," Teal added.

"It's not just the astronauts. Some people farther up the food chain realize how disastrous it would be if something happened to one of you. There's some talk about canceling the project."

"You're saying we might have gone through all of this for nothing," Ashley said.

"It's not over. At least, not yet," Colonel Sanderson replied.

"And if it was over for us, is it over for you too?" I asked.

"If they decide not to send the youngest astronauts, they won't send the oldest."

"I'm really sorry if I cost you a chance to go into space one more time by pulling this stunt," I said.

"It's not your fault. This might fall apart regardless," he said.

The door opened and Dr. Amos came into the room, followed by two men and two women I didn't know. They sat down and were introduced as two psychologists, a social worker and something called a psychometrist. They told us their names, but the names all sort of blurred together in my head—a sign that I was really nervous about what was happening.

Dr. Amos explained that this was the team who had gone through the data, looking at the recordings and tapes of the situation—apparently, we had been filmed by underwater cameras the whole time. I started to feel more nervous as he explained more things.

"Let's start with the positives," Dr. Amos said. "You worked successfully as a team to overcome the multiple system failures that produced a life-and-death situation. Now a question. Can you list alternate solutions to the situation you were in?"

Teal and Ashley both looked at me. I didn't have any idea what else we could have done.

“No other solutions?” he asked.

“We could have had enough air in our helmets to get to the space station and enter through the lock,” Teal said.

“That’s right. We could have gotten to the bottom or even floated down and made our way over to the station. That might have worked,” Ashley said.

“Or we could have removed the helmets completely,” Teal said. “We then could have taken the tube that was providing oxygen and put it directly in our mouths.”

Two of the people were writing down notes. I knew this was about more than giving us feedback—it was part of the ongoing assessment.

“Both would have worked. Obviously, you have been thinking through the entire scenario,” Dr. Amos said.

“Wouldn’t you have kept thinking about it?” Teal asked.

“Well, yes, I think it’s a very logical and sensible response. Houston, did you consider either of those two alternative actions before you pursued your solution?”

“No.”

“Don’t you think you should have consulted with your team before choosing your route?” he asked. “Wouldn’t that have been a better avenue? To look at all the alternatives before you arbitrarily decided what action should take place?”

Suddenly this had gone from me saving everybody to me doing the wrong thing.

“Yes, I guess it would have been better to talk to them.”

“Should your team members expect you to act arbitrarily in the future, to not consult with them when a crisis arises? Is that the best way a team should—”

“Are you nuts?” Teal asked, cutting him off. “If he hadn’t acted right then, if the elevator had gone down a few more feet, then his solution, the one that *worked*, would have been taken off the table!”

I looked directly at Dr. Amos. “The test didn’t stop when we got back on the deck. The last meeting, this meeting—you’re evaluating what we’re saying and what we’re doing. This is still part of the simulation.”

He hesitated for a few seconds and then smiled ever so slightly. “This *was* part of the simulation before you saw through it as well. You know we do this with all astronauts in training, and very seldom does anybody see through the simulation. And you’ve seen through it twice.”

“That’s because we’re different than the other astronauts,” Ashley said.

“We’re simply trying to see if those differences are going to negatively impact your ability to function in space as members of a team.”

“Anybody can see we’re a team,” Teal said.

“You would be *part* of a team. We needed to know if you could stand up for yourselves if you thought an adult astronaut was doing something that you considered wrong or a bad solution.”

“I guess we’ve answered that,” Ashley said. “We can stand up for ourselves.”

“Houston, did you know that your vital signs were very unusual during the underwater simulation?”

“What was unusual?”

“During a crisis it’s expected that your heart will beat faster, your blood pressure will rise and your respiration rate will increase,” Dr. Amos said. “Your vital signs, after a spike

that looked very normal, did the *reverse*. Your heart beat slowed, you took fewer breaths, and your blood pressure actual fell. That type of response is registered by less than 1 percent of the population.”

“Is that bad?” I asked.

“Quite the opposite. When you should have panicked, you became calmer. That’s the sort of response associated with those who have previously experienced multiple crisis situations, like test pilots, or those who been specifically trained in de-stressing techniques such as meditation or yoga.”

“That wasn’t how it was for me, was it?” Teal asked.

Dr. Amos shook his head. “Your vital signs spiked dramatically, almost instantly.”

“But you said that was to be expected in a crisis,” Ashley said. “I’m sure mine did the same.”

“You both spiked. The difference was that Teal’s continued to rise. Teal, did you experience a panic attack?”

“It was pretty terrifying,” Ashley said before Teal could reply.

“It was meant to be. Your vital signs went up significantly, but not beyond the normal range, while Teal’s did.”

“Maybe her engine revs a little higher, but she did what she needed to do,” I said. “It wasn’t just me who lifted Ashley to the surface.”

“We were listening to your communications from the time you were standing on the deck, before you even went into the pool. Would you like to hear the recordings?” Dr. Amos asked.

“That won’t be necessary,” Teal said.

“Teal, how long have you suffered from claustrophobia?” Dr. Amos asked.

“I don’t like closed spaces either,” Ashley said. “Who does?”

“Aren’t lots of people afraid of closed spaces?” I asked.

They looked back and forth at each other until one of the women spoke. “It’s one of the most common fears.”

“Along with fear of heights, flying and getting needles,” another man added.

“We certainly have no fear of needles!” Ashley joked. “We’ve been poked more in the past three weeks than I have been in my entire life.”

“What are the other top fears?” I asked, trying to keep it moving.

“Snakes, insects, dogs and storms,” the first woman continued.

“But none of those are a problem for being an astronaut,” Dr. Amos said. “Teal, your phobia about closed spaces is a serious concern.”

“Okay, now I’m a little confused,” Colonel Sanderson said. He’d been so quiet I’d almost forgotten he was there. He continued to speak. “Don’t therapists believe in the ability of people to change, to overcome their problems and their phobias?”

“Well, of course,” Dr. Amos said.

“Then isn’t it your job to work with Teal to overcome this fear she has?” Colonel Sanderson questioned. “Have you devised a plan for her to work on this?”

“Colonel Sanderson, that’s one of the reasons we’re here today. We’re going to plot out adaptive techniques to make them all better suited for the mission,” Dr. Amos said. “You didn’t think we were going to ask Teal to leave the program, did you?”

There was a split second of hesitation in the colonel's answer. "Of course not. There's no reason to ask her to leave. They're all wonderful candidates and are going to adapt well in space. They're going to make us all proud."

"You have to understand that my team, the people in this room, are completely, 100 percent behind this program," Dr. Amos said.

The other members nodded enthusiastically and voiced agreement.

"We've been given the chance to observe human behavior, reactions and effects under conditions that have never been studied before. To have young people put through training and then potentially into space, well, it's just *groundbreaking*."

"It's truly amazing to be part of this experiment," one of the women said.

That's what we were—an experiment. We were being studied, poked, prodded, observed and tested. They weren't just drawing our blood but testing every part of us.

"Now, we need to continue with the debriefing because we don't have much time until you'll be back in the pool," Dr. Amos said.

"We're going back into the pool today?" Ashley asked.

"In less than two hours. You have to do the simulation work with the space station that was scheduled. Of course, this time your helmets will be sealed, your com-links will work and the Navy SEALs will be there in the pool with you to provide ongoing safety and assistance."

"Great. We're looking forward to giving it another shot," I said.

That wasn't what I was feeling, but I knew it was what I had to say. This time it would work better. Unless they decided to test us a little bit more.

Twenty-Three

"I'm not sure why this still makes you nervous," the doctor said as he drew some blood from my arm.

"I'm just tired of it. How many days has it been?"

"Forty or so."

"Forty-nine," Ashley said. "This is day forty-nine, with eleven still to go."

"Assuming we last," Teal added. She was sitting across the room, hooked up to a machine that was monitoring her heart and breathing.

"We're going to make it," Ashley said.

I wanted to believe Ashley, but I was leaning more toward Teal's caution. Teal had been part of a whole program designed to desensitize her to her phobia about closed spaces. From what she'd said, it had been working.

"Okay, that's the last of your blood I need today," the doctor said.

He put the vial of my blood in the tray with the others and walked out of the room, leaving the three of us alone. We knew we were being assessed and reported on by everybody all of the time, so I felt a little more relaxed with him gone.

This had been an incredible seven weeks. Every day had been different, but in many ways the same. Training, tests, simulations and evaluations, and lots of activities and physical challenges. We'd spent days and days in the simulators, briefed and debriefed and rebriefed and tested and retested for every possible situation and problem. We'd been in zero-gravity simulators, rocket sleds to simulate liftoff pressures and simulated space walks, and, best of all, we'd climbed into and out of a real rocket a dozen times. We'd gone through the whole launch sequence, and we'd also been through an emergency evacuation as part of a fire drill. Fires were always the greatest danger, whether it was on the launch pad or in the space station itself.

At the same time, the physical training had continued. We'd had runs in the middle of the night, done calisthenics, lifted weights and taken ocean swims. We'd been taught how to scuba dive and had been on ocean dives. Three times we had been back in our special space suits and worked at "repairing" the space station at the bottom of the pool. I imagined that was the closest thing to really being in space. It had been incredible, almost dreamlike. In fact, it was the part of our training that kept recurring in my dreams at night.

So far there'd been no hints about who was going to make it—if any of us. We'd all fared better in some parts and worse in others. In some portions of the training, we'd done better than some of the adult astronauts. We knew we weren't being held to their standards, but how could we be? We were in a compressed sixty-day version of what some of them had trained years for.

Mostly the other astronauts had been pretty good to us. Some of them seemed like genuinely nice people. I still thought some were just better at pretending. Of course, the pretending wouldn't have to last much longer, because the crew members of the mission would be announced sometime in the next few days—including which two of us would be going. At least, that's what we still believed.

We hadn't spoken about it, but I think we all thought I was most likely to be chosen. I was the only male and I'd done pretty well. Not just with the tests and simulations—my instant recall kept coming in handy—but in that simulated crisis in the pool. I'd been told by the colonel that that was a big thing.

Teal and Ashley both had also done well. Either one could be chosen. Not that I had a vote, but I knew who I was pulling for—Ashley. In some ways it felt wrong of me to feel that way, like I was betraying Teal, but if I were going to be in space with my life on the line, it was Ashley I'd want there with me. Not that I'd ever say anything or let them know, but it was how I felt.

They were both my friends. I'd tried to think of Teal as nothing but a friend. Sometimes that was hard. She was still, well, beautiful, but it was so much more than that. There was a glow about her, an essence of energy and creativity and confidence. I'd catch myself looking at her and then she'd turn in my direction and I'd feel like I'd been "caught." It was embarrassing, and it also felt wrong. She was my friend, my teammate. Still, I couldn't stop thinking about that almost kiss we'd had. Would it have been so wrong if it had happened? Would it be so wrong if it still happened?

"Houston?"

I startled out of my thoughts and looked over at Teal. For one terrible moment I wondered if she had somehow read my mind.

"What do you think about the debriefing that's scheduled for later this afternoon?"

"It's a debriefing. We've had those a dozen times."

"Teal's right. It's about time they made their decision," Ashley added. "About which of us are going up."

"I don't know if that's happening yet. I think they're going to wait until the training is completely finished before they make the final decision about which of us they'll select," I said.

"That's if any of us are going," Teal said.

We'd heard the rumors circulating about whether TAP—the Teen Astronaut Program—would be moving forward. I knew a bunch of astronauts who would be happy if it was more than just a rumor. No spots on the mission for any of us meant more spots for them.

"Are you excited about seeing your family this weekend?" Ashley asked.

Our families were coming in for an overnight visit. We'd talked on the phone all the time and had a bunch of virtual sessions, but this was the first time we'd be seeing them since before training started.

"I can't believe how much I miss the Boo-Boos. I hope they'll remember me," I said.

"They'll remember you. I think I'm even looking forward to seeing my bratty cousins," Ashley said.

Teal was staring off into the distance. Did that mean her mother wasn't coming? Should I say something?

"I heard a couple of the astronauts talking about how they're really looking forward to meeting your mother, Teal," Ashley said.

So much for being delicate.

Teal snickered a bit. "I hear that all the time, but they're going to be disappointed."

"She's not coming?" Ashley asked.

"As far as I know she's coming, but a photoshopped picture that people have seen in some magazine is a lot different than how she looks in real life."

"I don't care what she or her pictures look like," Ashley said. "I care about her daughter."

"Same," I said. "I care about you and Ashley."

Ashley nodded. "The three of us is what's important. I guess things have changed a lot since our first meeting."

"That's an understatement. I trust you with my life," I said.

"The three of us have to trust each other that way," Ashley said.

"I trust both of you with my life. Do you trust me with your life?" Teal asked Ashley.

Ashley hesitated a split second and as she opened her mouth to answer, Teal turned to me. "Do you trust me with your life, Houston?"

I knew not to hesitate. "Yes, of course I do."

"As much as you trust Ashley?"

"Yes, of course."

"You're not a very good liar," she said.

"I'm not lying!"

"Yes, you are. Look, I know neither of you trusts me as much as you trust each other," Teal said.

"Don't say that," Ashley said.

"It's the truth. It's not like you can convince me that I'm wrong about—"

Teal stopped in midsentence as Colonel Sanderson walked in, and we all turned to look at him.

"If I was paranoid, I'd think you were talking about me," he joked.

"Can I ask you a question?" Teal asked.

"Of course. Go ahead."

"Which of us do you trust the most?"

"I trust each of you in different ways in different situations."

"Which of us would you trust if your life was on the line?" she asked.

I expected him to try to deflect the question. He didn't.

"Houston is the person I trust. Don't you two agree with that?"

"I do," Teal said, and Ashley nodded.

"We've seen demonstrable action on Houston's part in a simulated life-and-death situation. He came through."

"Okay, we all agree he's the one we trust the most," Teal said. "Who do you trust the least? Don't worry about hurting my feelings because *I'm* the one *I* trust the least. Just tell us."

The colonel nodded. "I agree. The incident in the pool and your fear of close spaces."

"But she's been receiving desensitization training and therapy and—"

"And it's helped," Teal, said, cutting me off, "but probably not enough to make me as reliable as you."

The colonel took a seat and motioned for us to sit down at the table.

"Teal, are you considering disqualifying yourself from the mission?" he asked.

"I think it might be better if I remain on the ground," she said.

He shook his head slowly. "I know that's a big decision, but could you do me a favor—could you do us *all* a favor—and not tell them that at this time? I'm afraid if you eliminate yourself at this point, it would be used as ammunition for those who want the whole program shut down."

"We'd all heard rumors, but I thought maybe we were past that by now," I said.

"Nothing is certain until you're in the capsule and the rocket has cleared the tower. Let's give them nothing more to discuss." He paused. "Teal, if you were selected, I wouldn't need to think about it for a second, because I do trust you with my life. Now I'm trusting you to keep this to yourself. Okay?"

She nodded. "I can keep it to myself—for now. I won't do anything that endangers plans for the rest of you."

"Good. The only four people I trust completely are all in this room." Just then, the doctor walked back in. "Now let's keep shooting for the stars," he quickly added.

I suddenly thought of something my mother used to say. "If you shoot for the stars and you miss, you still might end up on the moon."

"There are no missions planned to the moon," Colonel Sanderson said.

"But there are to Mars," Ashley said.

A smile came to Colonel Sanderson's face. "Yes, there are. Can you imagine being the first person to set foot on Mars?"

"It would be amazing," I said. "Beyond amazing."

"It's okay to dream, but for now I guess we'll have to settle for the space station."

Twenty-Four

I pushed off the ground to simulate a jump and shot up into the air! The machine attached to my back was programmed to compensate for Earth's gravity, to make it feel like I was on the surface of the moon. It had taken a bit of time to get used to walking and jumping, but I couldn't help thinking that this must be how a kangaroo would feel all the time. It was all just fun.

We were taking turns, seeing who could jump the highest and move the farthest in a series of steps across the "moonscape." So far Teal was winning. The former gymnast in her made her so coordinated. I liked winning, but I liked her winning even more right now.

I needed focus for the next jump. I pushed off hard and flew up into the air, then landed and did a second step and a third and a fourth.

"You're really getting the hang of this!" the controller said through the PA system. "That was the farthest any of you traveled today!"

I settled back down to the ground, and the technician came forward and helped unhook me from the machine. My vital signs were also being monitored. That was standard practice. Everything we did was monitored.

"I was surprised we didn't jump higher," I said to the technician.

"You did well," he said.

"But I thought I'd be able to jump six times as high because the moon's gravity is only one-sixth of Earth's."

"These were set for 38 percent of Earth's gravity," he said.

"Why were they programmed to simulate the gravity of Mars?" I asked.

"They were still set for the last training team."

"The Mars team? They were training here?"

He looked uneasy. "I shouldn't have said anything. I'm afraid that's classified, and I can't really say. Tell you what. Next time you come, how about we program for Mercury?"

"To jump that high would be fun. Hey, can I ask you something? How do you feel about us being here?"

"I don't understand."

"Some people think we shouldn't be considered for space."

"Why not? You're being given a chance to live out the fantasy of every single person here. Who didn't want to go into space when they were a kid?"

"It is pretty cool," I agreed.

He finished unhooking the leads from my chest, and I climbed down.

"Thanks for your help," I said.

Teal and Ashley gave me high fives as I walked up to them. "You can now say you know what it's like to walk on Mars."

"I thought we were simulating the moon walk," Teal said.

"I asked the technician, and the machines were calibrated for Mars."

"Mars or the moon—it doesn't matter," Ashley said. "What does matter is that it's time for lunch."

"A long lunch. They haven't scheduled anything more until our debriefing in three hours," Teal said.

We left the simulation and headed toward the cafeteria. We were intercepted by Colonel Sanderson. "Sorry, but you have one more thing to do before lunch."

"Is it a drill or test?" Ashley asked.

"You're going to be asked to write a letter to your families."

"We write emails to them all the time," Ashley said.

"This is a little different. This is a letter to be given to them if you die during the mission."

"Seriously?" I asked.

"Seriously. And it actually will go to your family if something happens."

"But the assessment team is going to read them as well," I said. "It's part of the assessment, right?"

He nodded. "Isn't everything?"

"Does that mean we should sound brave?" Teal asked.

"Brave, but not stupid. Just tell your families that you'll miss them, that you expect to live but are prepared to make the sacrifice. Nothing too fancy or flowery. Got it?"

We all nodded.



I went to put the letter into the envelope and thought I should read it again. I unfolded it and carefully straightened it out.

I took a deep breath. It was hard enough to write it. Reading it again was even harder.

Dear Suzie, Brad, Brett and Dylan,

I hope you'll never have to read this letter, because if you do, it means that I'm dead. I'm confident it won't happen. These NASA people know what they're doing and take every precaution, and they've trained us well. Still, people die. I know that, and you know that. We all signed on knowing it could happen.

I think the worst part, if it's happened, is how it's made all of you feel sad. I know you'll handle it, but it's hard knowing I caused that. I'm sorry for doing that. I'm sorry for making the Boo-Boos have to go through this. I know Suzie will help them understand, help them through this—the way she helped me through it before. I'm even sorrier for causing her to lose somebody else in her family.

I took a deep breath. This was hard. Maybe harder than any of the training we'd done so far.

Thank you, Suzie and Brad, for taking me in and raising me. I know it wasn't easy, and I know that some of the things you did for me, the money you spent on me, was money that could have gone to the Boo-Boos. You never complained. You made me feel like I was part of your family. I want to thank you again. For everything.

I could feel myself shaking a little bit. Did anybody else see that? Was anybody else watching? I looked around. Teal and Ashley were at work on their letters. There was nobody else, not even a mirror for someone to hide behind. Of course, that didn't mean there weren't little cameras watching and microphones listening in. At least we weren't wearing sensors, so they couldn't be reading our vital signs.

Teal looked over and gave me a little smile. It was a sad smile. I wouldn't have expected anything else. I went back to my letter.

The next part I'd thought long and hard about, but I did it because it didn't matter who else saw it—I wanted my aunt and uncle to see it.

When my parents died, there were times when I didn't know why I was alive. There were times when I didn't want to be alive. You kept me going. Suzie, you told me that I had been spared because there was something important I was meant to do. This was it. I did something that nobody my age has ever done.

The last thing I want you to feel is that you're responsible in any way, like it's your fault because you didn't stop me from going to space. It was my decision. I did it knowing that there were risks and dangers and I could die.

It seems like it was only a few weeks ago and like forever ago that my parents died. I knew about death. I knew it's real. That it could happen to me the way it happened to them. Most kids my age don't get it, that death can happen.

I want you to know how much you all mean to me, that I have no regrets, that I did all of this because it was what I was meant to do. I hope you're proud of me. I know my parents would have been.

With love, Houston

And then it hit me. It wasn't just me—Ashley had lost her parents, and Teal had lost her father. It was all of us. Was that just a coincidence? It couldn't be.



I knocked on Ashley's door, and it popped open.

"Sorry to disturb you," I said. "Were you sleeping?"

"I couldn't get to sleep. I was thinking about the letter."

"Me too. How about if we go to Teal's room?" I paused. "I have something I want to talk to you two about."

"Is it about the letters?"

"Not really the letters, but something they got me thinking about."

Ashley pulled her door closed, and we headed down the hall to Teal's room. Just as we got there the door opened, and she peeked out.

"I was just coming to see you guys," she said. "Come on in."

We followed her in, and I sat down on the couch.

"No, not here. In the bathroom."

Ashley and I exchanged confused looks. She shrugged, and we followed Teal. She closed the door as we entered and then turned on the shower. What was going on?

"We need to make sure that nobody is listening in," Teal explained in a whisper. "The water is white noise. It drowns out our voices."

"I think you're a little paranoid," I said.

"You know they're always watching us, except for maybe here," Teal said.

We sat down on the floor.

"I wanted to talk about the letters we wrote," Ashley said.

"So do I," I said. "Writing it got me thinking about why they chose us. Like, I know we're good candidates, but is there another reason?"

"Like, we should have six parents," Ashley said, "and there's only Teal's mother?"

"Exactly. Do you think they chose us because we all know about death? Do you think it made us different?" Ashley asked.

"We are different," I agreed. "But it's more than that. Is it because our deaths would mean so much less?"

"What do you mean?" Teal asked.

"If we die, there would be no grieving parents to go on TV or to be interviewed," I explained. "Nobody to be blasted across social media in tears."

"We still have our families," Ashley said.

"Aunts and uncles," Teal explained. "It's different."

"But you have a parent, your mother," Ashley said.

"She doesn't cry," Teal said. "She wouldn't get that emotional about me."

"Of course she'd be emotional," I said.

"She's not even emotional about me when I'm alive. I guess I didn't mention that she's not coming this weekend." Teal was starting to tear up. "She sent me a text to tell me she had 'other things' she had to do and couldn't be here."

Ashley reached out and took Teal's hand. I took Teal's other hand and then reached for Ashley's hand, so we were in a little circle, linked together.

"I started to write the letter to my mother and...and..." She burst into tears.

"Teal, it's all right," I said.

"No, it isn't!" she snapped. "How can it be all right that my mother doesn't care for me?"

"She cares for you," Ashley said.

"Not enough. It's just...just that when I was writing the letter, I didn't even write it to my mother. I wrote it to people who actually care about me."

"Who did you write it to?" I asked.

"You and Ashley. How pathetic is that? How pathetic am I?"

"You're not pathetic," Ashley said.

She shook her head. "Yes I am. My father is dead, and even when he wasn't dead, I hadn't seen him for years. I've got a mother who doesn't care enough to even show up. Except for you two, I don't have anybody."

"I don't think it's much different for me," Ashley said. "I don't think I'm the easiest person to like."

Neither Teal nor I said anything.

"Isn't one of you going to argue?" she asked.

"You're very likable!" I said. "Very. Maybe just not at first." Ashley laughed and gave

my hand a squeeze. "Houston, do you have a lot of friends?"

"I hang around with people, but somehow I've always felt, well, different than them."

"Me too," Ashley said. "Different."

"We are different," Teal said. "Maybe that's what they saw."

We sat in silence for a while, thinking.

"Just out of curiosity, Teal, what did you write in your letter?" I asked.

"You're never going to know unless I die," she said.

"Then I hope I never know." I looked at my watch. "We better get ready for the meeting."

I tried to stand up, but Teal kept holding my hand and pulled me back down.

"Let's just stay here for a few minutes, okay?"

"It's more than okay."

Twenty-Five

We sat side by side at the conference table, Teal in the middle, me on her left and Ashley on her right. I looked up at the mirror and stared at our reflections. We were all in our flight suits, of course. I thought I would have gotten sick of it by now, but I still got a little rush of excitement whenever I put it on.

Teal's eyes caught mine in the mirror, and she smiled. I smiled back then startled at the sound of the door opening. Colonel Sanderson walked in and took the empty seat beside Ashley.

"Do you know who we're meeting with?" I asked.

"There's just one chair, and the rule of thumb is that the fewer the seats, the more important the people filling them."

"Who's the most important person who could be sitting there?" Ashley asked.

The door opened and Dr. Fernandez, the center director, came in. Nobody was more important than her.

Colonel Sanderson stood up and we all got to our feet as well.

"Great to see you, Colonel," she said as they shook hands.

"And you," the colonel replied.

Dr. Fernandez shook hands with Teal, Ashley and me, then sat and motioned for us to do the same.

"Thank you for joining me today. I want you to know that at three o'clock there will be a press conference to formally announce the Teen Astronaut Program. At that time, you will be introduced to the press."

I took in a deep breath. I hadn't realized I'd been holding my breath.

"Congratulations to all of you."

It was happening. The program was going forward.

"Has there been a decision reached on which of us will be going into space?"

She hesitated before answering. "This has been more difficult than we expected, as you are all excellent candidates. We will be announcing at the press conference that two of you will be going, but not which two."

"Is that because the decision hasn't been reached or that it simply isn't being announced today?" I asked.

Her hesitation this time was even longer. That meant they knew but weren't telling us.

"Nothing is set in stone. There are still final issues to be addressed."

"But you're pretty certain, aren't you?" Teal asked.

Dr. Fernandez nodded. "Regardless of who goes into space and who remains, you are all an integral part of the program. Two of you are going into space, but all three of you are vital members of this mission."

That made it sound better, even if it really wasn't.

"But Houston is going for sure, right?" Ashley asked.

"Houston has handled himself well throughout the training," she said. "So...yes, he has been selected."

Teal and Ashley threw their arms around me and congratulated me. Then Colonel Sanderson reached over and we shook hands.

"Congratulations, son, you deserve to be there with us," he said.

I knew that since at least one of us was going that the Colonel was now going.

"Thanks! Thanks to all of you! I'll do my best. I promise."

"So, it's down to one of us going and one of us staying," Teal said.

"Have all the other mission members been selected?" Ashley asked.

"Yes. The others are being notified right now."

"And those who aren't going? When will they know?" I asked.

"The list will be posted within the hour. By dinnertime it will be common knowledge."

"Can you tell us who they are?" I asked.

"I think that's acceptable. Well, I can confirm that Colonel Sanderson is on the mission. He'll be a payload specialist."

"Not as commander?" I asked.

"He'll be the senior officer by virtue of age, rank and experience in space, but the commander role will be filled by Lieutenant Colonel Rebecca Ingram."

"A wonderful choice," Colonel Sanderson said. "I'm proud to serve under her command."

We all knew Colonel Ingram. She was calm and made us feel calmer around her. She'd been in space once before and had spent four months on the Space Station. She'd also always been helpful and friendly and professional with all of us. It wasn't like she didn't know we were kids, but she didn't make us feel like we were *just* kids.

Dr. Fernandez continued. "Your mission pilot, responsible for docking and bringing you back to Earth, will be Captain Frank Elliott."

"I thought it might be him," I said.

"You did?" Dr. Fernandez asked.

"He's flown two missions before as a pilot, he's the best in simulations of docking and landing, and he was a test pilot," I explained.

"We're glad you approve," Dr. Fernandez said. "We've actually all been impressed with your success in the simulator."

"Thank you." I'd spent a lot of time on the simulator. It was like a gigantic, amazing video game.

"Which leaves us with the last selection. The flight engineer on your mission is Dr. Malcom Mendoza."

"I thought I knew everybody in the program," Colonel Sanderson said.

"While he has fully trained and qualified as an astronaut, his placement, training and expertise are in relation to the Mars mission. There are systems on the space station that need to be adapted for the next generation of spacecraft, those that will take humans to Mars."

The Mars mission just amazed me. I'd read everything I could find about it, and now I

was going to space with one of the astronauts who could actually be going to the red planet.

“You should also know that you three will be going on an extended press tour after the visits with your families this weekend.”

“A what?” I asked.

“You’ll be part of an international press tour, stopping in at least four other countries that are partners in the International Space Station. The whole world is going to get to know about both the Teen Astronaut Program and the participants. No more secrets.”

I felt a sense of relief. My friends would know. Everybody would know.

“You’re about to become three of the most famous people in the world,” Dr. Fernandez said.

My whole body went into a flop sweat. This was scarier than the thought of going to space.

Twenty-Six

I looked out at the audience and tried to find my aunt and uncle and the Boo-Boos. The seats were in darkness, and they were one row back from an open space filled with reporters and cameras and very bright lights. All eyes were aimed at the group of us on the stage. It was the three of us at one end of the long table, Colonel Sanderson beside me, Dr. Fernandez in the middle and then the other three members of the mission.

“Hoooooussston!”

It was one of the Boo-Boos calling for me. I used a hand to shade my eyes from the TV lights and stared into the darkness in the direction of the voice. There was some movement, wild waving and jumping, and then they both started to hoot and yell. I could picture my aunt trying to calm them down. I waved and couldn’t help but smile.

It had been a wonderful weekend with my family. Teal had spent a lot of the time with us. Although her mother hadn’t attended, the two of them did have a phone call. What could her mother be doing that was more important than this?

One of the PR people stood up and got everybody’s attention to let them know we were about to begin. The noise stopped but the pictures didn’t. There were lots of camera flashes, and it seemed most of them were aimed at our end of the table. Then again, why wouldn’t they be? We were news—big news. Three teens being prepared to travel into space.

“I’d like to start by welcoming you all,” Dr. Fernandez said. “I recognize some of you as veteran reporters covering the space program, but I’ve been told that this is the largest gathering of reporters ever at one of our press conferences, surpassing the previous reception accorded to Neil Armstrong and the crew of *Apollo 11* upon their return from the moon, where Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin became the first humans to set foot on its surface.”

I swallowed hard. I was lucky I couldn’t see my family in the dark. I looked over at Ashley and then Teal. Ashley looked as uneasy as I felt. Teal was as calm and collected as always.

“I’m sure your attendance is in response to the press release of two days ago announcing the creation of our Teen Astronaut Program—we call it TAP because, basically, NASA believes in acronyms almost as much as we believe in space travel.”

There was a little wave of laughter from the audience that made me feel a bit better.

“TAP is *one* of our exciting initiatives, separate from but related to our planning a manned landing on Mars.

“The concept, as with many programs that have been conceived and are being planned, was one of our most top secret. Over a number of years, the logistics and schedule for the program itself were plotted while we also searched for the teenage candidates who could turn this concept into a reality. A specialized team quietly and carefully searched across the country for the young people who had the right stuff to become astronauts. This group of candidates was narrowed to two groups of 60, and from those 120 our 3 finalists were selected.

“Now, we’ll begin with introductions of all the members of this mission, followed by a formal presentation, and then we’ll throw it open for questions, and we’ll end with

something a little different.”

I wasn’t sure what she meant by different, but then again, everything we’d done was different.

She went down the line, introducing the members of our mission one by one. She started at the other side of the podium so we’d be last.

I listened as Lieutenant Colonel Ingram, Captain Elliott and Dr. Mendoza were introduced. They were impressively qualified—your typical astronauts. They were exactly what you’d expect. Each introduction was followed by polite applause from the audience.

“Our payload specialist, Colonel Sanderson, is known to all of you who know the space program. He is a living legend,” Dr. Fernandez said.

“I’m glad you added the *living* part,” Colonel Sanderson said, and there was more laughter.

“Alive and healthy, I might add,” Dr. Fernandez said. “The colonel has been fully medically vetted, as all astronauts are, and is healthy and extremely fit. He will become the oldest person ever to spend extended time in space. His mission is actually a direct result of the TAP initiative.”

“Apparently, I’ve gone from living legend to teenager in a few short seconds,” he joked. Again, more laughter.

“As we are studying the effects of long-term space exposure on the human body in different stages of life, there could be no better candidate than Colonel Sanderson and his brother.”

I turned to him. “Brother?”

He nodded.

“His identical twin brother,” Dr. Fernandez said as she continued. “The brothers—one in space and one on the ground—will be subject to constant physical testing and evaluation to judge the effects and results on Colonel Sanderson of extended periods of near zero-gravity conditions on the space station.”

That made perfect sense. So much so that I wondered why they weren’t looking for two sets of twins our age, so they could send one to space and have one remain earthbound. That would be the perfect test situation.

“Which leads us to our last three astronaut candidates,” Dr. Fernandez said. “Two of these young people will be traveling into space and the third will be an equally active member of the team on Earth, being monitored and tested along with Colonel Sanderson’s brother. A final decision on which two will be sent into space will be announced by the end of the month. Now, I will start by introducing the first member of TAP, Houston Williams.”

There was an instant barrage of flashes, and I sat up a little bit taller in my seat, leaned slightly forward and tried to put on a serious—not scared—expression.

“Houston Williams is—as are all of our candidates—thirteen years of age. He was born and raised in Brookfield, Wisconsin, where he most recently graduated from Mitchell Middle School with an average of 97.5 percent.” She hesitated. “His mark in art brought down his average.”

A little bit of laughter.

“Seated next to him is Ashley Ling. She is from Santa Monica, California, where she is a recent graduate of Chadwick Academy. Along with a 100 percent average, she has already completed university-level courses in advanced calculus and algebra. In addition, she has been receiving instructions in conversational Russian. If she is selected, Ashley will be able

to communicate with our Russian partners in their native language.”

She’d never mentioned that to us. It was a big advantage. And those university-level courses *were* impressive. Ashley was impressive. She always had been, even when I didn’t like her.

“And our final candidate, Teal St. Jermaine,” Dr. Fernandez began.

I turned to look. In her blue flight suit—the kind we were all wearing—she looked like an astronaut, but she also looked like an actor playing an astronaut. She looked older, as well. If somebody told me she was eighteen or nineteen, I would have believed it.

“While Teal has attended schools and academies in three different European countries, most recently she has been attending the prestigious Surval Montreux in Switzerland. In her most recently completed year she obtained a perfect grade-point average in a unique program that combines her interests in international studies, world politics and ecology. She is a graduate of survival training and is an accomplished scuba diver. Teal is an American citizen with dual French citizenship, which means she will represent two of the countries involved with our mission. And while the language of the space station is English, she is completely fluent in both French and Spanish.”

It wasn’t just Ashley who sounded more impressive than me. If I were hearing all this, I’d be betting on the two of them being selected. There probably were only a dozen people who knew that I’d already been chosen to fill one of the spots.

“Now for a brief overview of the scientific reasoning behind the program,” Dr. Fernandez said. “As we move from short- to long-distance space travel, our plan is to establish colonies on other planets and beyond. This will require astronauts to be in space for intervals of not days or weeks or months, but years. Ultimately families, partners with children, will be part of these travels. In time babies will be conceived and born in non-terrestrial settings, including on other planets or spaceships headed to those planets. It is necessary for us to see the effects of extended space on the physiology and psychology of people in different age groups. Thus, two teenagers and one senior citizen will be present on this extended stay at the International Space Station. We’ve prepared a short video to explain this in more detail. Could we have the lights, please.”

The room became dim and then dark, and two big screens at the side came to life. The video showed familiar NASA sights and symbols, with a full orchestra playing inspirational *National Geographic* sort of music as the background. There were clips of an *Apollo* rocket lifting off at night, scenes of astronauts spacewalking or moving around inside the International Space Station and then Neil Armstrong stepping onto the moon, saying, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.”

I’d heard him speak those words so many times, but it still took my breath away.

Then the screen changed and the music became even more dramatic as Neil Armstrong and the moon walk were replaced by images of Teal, Ashley and I during our training. Dressed in our flight suits, we were shown doing the obstacle course, in the simulator, floating in the Vomit Comet, sitting in meetings, having blood drawn by the doctor, in meetings with the other astronauts, and in the practice cockpit racing down and splashing into the pool. I felt a rush of adrenaline just watching it.

The screen faded to black. That had been pretty amazing—and then the theme music from my favorite space show started playing. The screen came back on but instead of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, it read *Teen Astronaut Program: The Next Generation!*

“Space...the final frontier.”

I knew those words and that voice immediately. It was Jean-Luc Picard—Patrick Stewart—saying the opening line of the show. If I hadn’t been sitting down already, I might have tumbled over in shock.

“From the first brief seconds in orbit, to traveling to the moon, to the International Space Station, the next steps are upon us,” Jean-Luc said. “Today, as we move toward Mars and beyond, we are testing the limits not only of human technology but of humanity itself. With the development of the Teen Astronaut Program we will be moving forward in our understanding of the effects of space travel on human beings. Ashley, Houston and Teal will be boldly going where no teenage humans have ever gone before.”

Jean-Luc Picard had just mentioned my name! Completely unbelievable. Maybe more unbelievable than anything that had happened before this.

Then we were back to images of the three of us as the music soared. The scene ended with us strapped into seats in the launch vehicle, then a voice-over doing a countdown and finally a rocket lifting off. It made it seem like we’d already been in space.

The screen faded to dark, the lights came on and there was a round of applause. I clapped along with them.

“Now let’s have some questions,” Dr. Fernandez said.

What seemed like hundreds of arms shot up into the air and started waving. People were calling out, trying to get her attention.

“Let’s take the first question from Lyle Chambers, from *Scientific American*,” Dr. Fernandez said.

“Thank you, Dr. Fernandez. I’d like to know how these three young people were selected as the astronaut candidates.”

Dr. Fernandez turned to us. “Who’d like to field that question? Houston?”

The hair on the back of my neck rose up. “We all received an invitation to attend a space camp. We didn’t know it wasn’t simply a space camp but a space audition. We passed the audition and were brought to Florida to receive an additional eight weeks of training and assessment to determine if we had the right stuff.”

“I’d like to add,” Dr. Fernandez said, “that every participant of that camp had been specifically chosen as a potential astronaut, as were the candidates from other camps. We arranged to have all the best candidates tested, and these three were the best of the best. Next question.”

There was another sea of hands waving in the air and she nodded at somebody.

“I’m Brittany Summers, *National Geographic*. What do you think was the scariest part of all of this up to this point?”

“So far, this press conference,” Ashley said, and there was loud laughter.

“And, following up, aren’t you afraid to go into space?” the reporter asked.

“We’re with the most professional, technically proficient people in the world,” Ashley said.

“But NASA has had deaths,” the reporter continued. “I believe there have been over a dozen astronauts who have died in space.”

“Only three have actually died in space,” I said.

“But if you count those who died in training or the Earth’s atmosphere, the number would be closer to thirty,” Ashley added.

“Then you do acknowledge that there are real dangers, and there should be some level of fear on your part,” the reporter said.

I had hoped Dr. Fernandez would step in, but she didn’t. I looked at Teal. She gave a little nod, as if to say, *I’ve got this*.

"We are completely aware of the dangers in what we are doing," Teal said. "Life is full of dangers. You all took airplanes and cars to come to this conference. Both of those involve risk."

"Next question," Dr. Fernandez said.

A reporter in a green pantsuit spoke up. "How did your families react to the news of your selection to be in TAP?"

"I think they were as shocked as we were," Ashley said.

"But proud of us," I added.

"Very proud!" my uncle Brad yelled from the back of the room. "Way to go, Houston!"

Everybody laughed.

"As I mentioned, the family members of our astronauts are present today," Dr. Fernandez said. "And those families have agreed to the candidates' participation with full knowledge of the potential dangers."

"But not all the families are present," the reporter said. "Teal, you're the daughter of Tasha St. Jermaine, are you not?"

"Yes, I am. My mother is in complete agreement with my involvement, but she made a very deliberate decision not to be here today."

It wasn't fair to single out Teal and her mother and embarrass them or—

"My mother felt that her appearance could potentially take the focus away from us and TAP. She and I are both familiar with the paparazzi, and she wanted to have the cameras aimed where they should be. She didn't want anything to interfere with what we're doing."

That was a wonderful answer. It sounded so believable and so noble, but it was also a lie.

"Are there any other questions that are not directed at our TAP members?" Dr. Fernandez asked.

There was a lull, no response, and then another reporter put his hand up, and Dr. Fernandez went to him.

"This question is for Dr. Mendoza. You're on this mission to help retrofit the International Space Station to accommodate spacecraft that are going to be part of the Mars mission, is that correct?"

"Um...yes," Dr. Mendoza said. He sounded as nervous as we had—well, as Ashley and I had, at least.

"But I think we've all heard reports that that mission is in danger of being canceled, so your work might have no meaning," he continued.

"There are always rumors," Dr. Fernandez said.

"We've heard that a report will soon be released that pegs the cost of the Mars mission as being at least twice the original estimate, which would put the total price at nearly six billion dollars and—"

"The costs will be high," Dr. Fernandez said. "But they are to be shared with three other countries."

"One of which is thinking of leaving the program," the reporter said.

"All of our partners are completely committed," Dr. Fernandez answered. "I'm afraid we have no more time for questions, but the TAP members are going to be readily available as they embark on a press tour in the coming days. We'll end today's press

conference with a small ceremony.”

Ashley leaned toward me and whispered, “Do you know what this is about?”

“No idea.”

“Three members of our crew have previously been in space,” Dr. Fernandez said. “Commander Ingram, Captain Elliott and, of course, Colonel Sanderson. Each of them, rightfully, is wearing the gold pin awarded upon their return from space.”

All three had the gold emblem pinned over their heart. The pin was small but stood out against the blue of the flight suits. It was a little gold star, trailing three vertical bars, shooting through a circle, and it was meant to look like the star was blasting off into space. If you didn’t know what it was, it might not have seemed that impressive or even special.

“Today the press is going to witness our four newest astronauts receiving their silver pins to signify that they have successfully completed their astronaut training.”

My whole body felt like a current of electricity was rushing through it.

“I would like the entire team to rise.”

We got to our feet. Colonel Sanderson was holding a silver pin in his hand. I noticed that Commander Ingram, Captain Elliott and Dr. Fernandez held silver pins too. Commander Ingram went to Teal, Dr. Fernandez to Ashley, Captain Elliott to Dr. Mendoza and Colonel Sanderson turned to stand in front of me.

“I was pretty certain from the moment I saw your profile that you were going to be selected,” he said. “I just had a feeling.”

He took the pin and fastened it on my flight suit, just above my heart.

“Congratulations,” he said as he shook my hand.

“Thank you.”

He leaned in close and whispered in my ear. “I’ve also received permission that when you get back—when *we* get back—from space, I’ll be putting the gold pin on you. I figure you’re eventually going to be the guy to break my record for space travel. I’m proud of you, Houston.”

I wanted to respond, but I just didn’t know what to say. This was beyond anything I could even believe.

“Let’s give a round of applause to our new astronauts and the entire team!” Dr. Fernandez said.

There was thunderous applause, and I could hear my uncle whistling and the Boo-Boos screaming. This was all happening, even though it seemed unreal.

Twenty-Seven

"They promised us we'd see you again at least twice before the mission," my aunt Suzie said. "Your tour sounds pretty exciting."

"I guess so."

"How could it not be? You're going to France, Canada, China and even Russia."

"I'd rather stay here and continue training."

"It's an amazing opportunity to travel and see the world," she said.

"I will be seeing the world. The whole world from space."

"I guess you will. Just remember we'll be back, so this isn't like a final goodbye."

"Hopefully even then it won't be the *final* goodbye," I said.

"You know what I mean. It's hard to be so careful with what we have to say. Those reporters were trying to put words in our mouths."

Brad and Suzie, along with Ashley's aunt and uncle, had been made available for the reporters to question. They all had a NASA publicity staff "handler"—to make sure the press wasn't pushing them too hard. From what I'd heard from my aunt and uncle that was a good thing as some of the questions had been difficult or provocative.

One of the reporters had said that responsible parents wouldn't have allowed us to go into space and asked if they thought our "real" parents would have agreed to it.

My uncle had told him that it was a "real stupid question."

"You be careful with your answers when you're on tour," Suzie said. "These reporters are looking to create a story as much as report on one. Can't believe that this isn't enough of a story all by itself." She leaned in closer. "I wish we could tell everybody that you've already been selected to go into space."

My aunt and uncle knew this but had been sworn to secrecy.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. I got some phone calls on my cell today from friends of yours. I guess they heard the announcement."

"I really miss the guys," I said.

"More than just the guys. A couple of girls. Jennifer and Tammy."

"Tammy...Tammy Morgan?"

"Yeah, that would be her. I don't think I've heard you mention her before," Aunt Suzie said.

"She's not really a close friend."

"Funny—she acted like you were the best of friends, making me promise to say hello, asking if she could get an email address where she could reach you. I told her you were a little bit too busy to go on email."

"Can you say hello to anybody who calls but I think you're right I won't have time to communicate. Speaking of time, you better get going, or you're going to miss your flight," I said.

"You're right. Boys, give Houston a big hug goodbye. We have to get going."

I wrapped my arms around both of them and squeezed them tight. I really was going to miss them. They squirmed until I finally let them go, and they raced off. My uncle chased after them and yelled out a goodbye over his shoulder.

I stood up and my aunt held out her arms and gave me a hug.

"You're so much bigger than you were when you left for camp. Taller and wider and stronger." She released me slightly so she could look me in the eyes. "And you need to be strong enough to call us and walk away if you decide you don't want to do this."

"I'm not going to change my mind. I'm going to space."

She smiled. "I know." She gave me one more little hug and then released me. "We'll see you in a few weeks. Call to talk anytime. I love you."

"I love you. I love all of you."

She looked like she was about to cry. She turned and rushed down the corridor after her husband and the boys, and then she was gone. I suddenly felt very alone. Instead of taller and stronger, I felt smaller and scared. But really, I wasn't alone. I had Teal and Ashley, the colonel and all of NASA. And the rest of the world was watching.



I walked down the corridor. I exchanged greetings—and accepted congratulations—from various astronauts and technicians along the way. Some I knew, some I'd seen around and some were complete strangers. I thought about all my friends seeing me on TV, all my teachers, the neighbors.

Teal was off to see her therapist, and Ashley had gone out for a run. It probably would have been better if they'd both gone for a nap. Me as well. None of us had slept very well the previous night, but I knew I was still too wired to think about napping.

We didn't have many days before we left on the press tour, and I didn't want to waste any time that I could use for training. I'd arranged to book an hour in the flight simulator. Colonel Sanderson was going to meet me there and help with the training. He was the alternate pilot for our mission and still one of the best. I knew there wasn't any way in the world—or in space—that they were going to let me pilot our ship, but still, I wanted to be prepared. Besides that, it was fun. I wished I'd had more time on it. I wished I'd had more time on everything. Our training had already been so much shorter than the training given to adult astronauts and now we'd be using so much of the remaining time before our launch giving press conferences.

I went into the building that housed the simulator, and there he was, the person I'd least wanted to see. Sutcliffe.

He stood just outside the module. I thought maybe I should turn and leave before he saw me, and wait for the colonel outside, but then he looked right at me. Leaving unseen was no longer an option and I wasn't giving him the satisfaction of thinking he was chasing me away. Besides, I was the one going to space.

I slowly walked toward him as he stared right at me. And then he clapped his hands. I hadn't expected that response. There was a big gap before he clapped again, another gap and another clap. It wasn't applauding in congratulations. It was a slow clap. He was letting me know that he wasn't impressed. I hadn't expected that from an astronaut.

"Congratulations," he said.

"You can stop now."

"Nothing wrong with a little applause, is there?"

"I know what you're doing. You need to grow up."

"Why? Being a kid seemed to work for you. You must be so *proud* of yourself, being selected over other more suitable and qualified candidates," he said.

"You had a shot, but you have to realize that three other regular astronauts were picked instead of you so it's not just us."

His look of disdain changed to surprise.

"They're not my issue. They're all qualified candidates."

"Apparently according to the selection committee they're more qualified than you," I said.

"And each person in this program is much more qualified than you. We've spent years training to go into space. Don't you feel bad taking away a spot from one of us?"

"Actually, I do."

Again, he looked surprised.

"I have nothing but respect for all the people who've been to space and have trained and dedicated their lives to becoming astronauts."

"But not enough respect to turn them down and let one of those more qualified candidates take your place."

I shrugged. "They want us. They need us."

"Need to *study* you. You're nothing more than an experiment. You're just fancy lab rats. And there's another one of the lab rats."

I turned around expecting to see Teal or Ashley. It was Colonel Sanderson.

"Good evening, Captain Sutcliffe."

He scowled at the colonel.

"The correct answer when somebody wishes you a good evening, especially somebody of higher rank, is to reply, 'Good evening, *sir*,' " Colonel Sanderson snapped.

"Good evening, sir," Sutcliffe said. "Although there's not much good about it."

"I know you're disappointed about not being selected."

"I'm disappointed that they chose less-qualified candidates."

"You knew all along those two spots were going to be filled by young people."

"I'm talking about three spots. You're not more qualified to go up than those of us who weren't selected. Your time has passed."

Colonel Sanderson laughed. "I guess it's better to have my time pass than to never have arrived at all. Like you."

"I'll get to space."

"I doubt it," Colonel Sanderson said. "You're one of the most qualified candidates in the history of NASA."

"So, you admit I'm right—I should be up there."

"You can *know* all the right stuff without *having* the right stuff. You think it's all about you when it's about the program," Colonel Sanderson said. "If you could only learn that, then—"

"You're like them. The age is different, but the experiment is the same," Sutcliffe said.

"You should watch your words," Colonel Sanderson warned him.

“Or what, you’ll report me?”

“Or we’ll settle this the way we did back in the day.”

“Do you really think you can take me in a fight?” Sutcliffe snarled. “You’re not just old—you must be senile. I’ve trained in three different forms of martial arts.”

“Good for you,” Colonel Sanderson said. “Let’s see what you got.” The colonel raised his fists.

I jumped in between them, facing the colonel. “Wait! Just...wait!”

The colonel seemed to relax slightly.

“Look, he’s not worth it,” I said. “You could be suspended from the mission for fighting. It’s not like back in the day. We need you up in space with us. We need you on the press tour.”

Colonel Sanderson lowered his arms.

“And that proves what I’m saying,” Sutcliffe said. “They’re not even bothering to provide thorough astronaut training anymore. You’re all just glorified lab rats, or maybe just a big public-relations stunt.”

“Couldn’t I just punch him once?” Colonel Sanderson asked.

I shook my head. “You can’t hit him because he’s right.”

I turned so I could see both of them.

I didn’t know who looked more shocked. I walked away. Just as I reached the door, I heard a sound and turned around. Sutcliffe was lying on the floor, clutching his nose in his hands, the colonel standing over him. The colonel strolled over to me. He opened the door for me, and I glanced back at Sutcliffe. He was still on the floor but was sitting up, still holding his nose in his hands. I could see blood pouring out. We walked away.

“Won’t you get in trouble for fighting?”

“Technically, it wasn’t a fight. That was just a beating.”

“But what if he reports you?” I asked.

“He won’t, but if he did, it would be the end of his career. I’m a damn living legend, remember?”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“What did you mean when you said he was right?” the colonel asked.

“We *are* a big publicity stunt.”

“You can’t let him get into your head. Wait. You’re not thinking of quitting, are you?”

“I’m not thinking of quitting, but we do need to talk. Me, you, Ashley and Teal. Let’s go find them.”

Twenty-Eight

We sat in our conference center—Teal's bathroom. Colonel Sanderson perched on the edge of the sink and the three of us sat on the floor.

"This isn't exactly where I thought the meeting was going to take place," Colonel Sanderson said. "How about we find someplace a little more comfortable?"

"Where they can overhear us?" Teal asked. She reached over and turned on the tap in the tub to create white noise.

"There are cameras and one-way mirrors all over this place," I added.

"In the *public* areas," the colonel said.

"And you're positive, 100 percent positive, that we're not being watched or listened to in our rooms?" Teal asked.

The colonel didn't answer with words but instead stood up and turned on the sink tap as well.

"Okay, Houston, you called this meeting so you start."

I told them about the conversation with Sutcliffe. I left out the part about the colonel punching him, but told them how Sutcliffe saw us as nothing more than lab rats in an experiment and publicity stunt, not real astronauts.

"It's hard not to argue, because this is an experiment," Teal said. "Isn't that the point of the whole project?"

"It is," the colonel said, "but the close monitoring isn't different with us than it is with any astronaut. It's not just the four of us who are continually medically monitored, tested and analyzed."

"As much as us?"

"Pretty well."

This did make sense. I could see in their expressions that Teal and Ashley agreed too.

"Well, we're definitely not as well trained as the other astronauts," Ashley said.

"Nobody is expecting you to be. Some of our candidates have been in school, in the military and in training longer than any of you have been alive."

"But that's what makes it unfair to the other astronauts."

"It's not about fair or unfair. It's about what's best for science. We need to know the ways long-term space exposure will have an effect on younger—and older—people," he said.

"I get that," I said. "But why not let us train as long as we can? Why waste the next seven weeks talking about going to space instead of getting ready to go to space?"

"It's because of the value we have for getting publicity," Teal replied. "It's like they said, they haven't had this much media attention since the first moon landing."

"Then we *are* a publicity stunt," Ashley said.

The colonel didn't answer. His expression was blank.

"You didn't know we were going to be sent away like this, did you?" I asked.

"I knew about a week before you three did."

"Do you think it's the right thing to do?" I asked.

"I told them that we needed every second for training, that what they were doing in sending you on tour was wrong. That they were risking the lives of all the members of the mission by shortening your training."

"And they didn't listen?" I asked.

"They always listen, but in the end, they make the decisions. They issue the orders. We're here to follow those orders."

"I'm not that good at following orders," Teal said. "Especially if I think they're wrong."

"I agree," I said. "And if we decide we don't want to follow those orders, what would happen?"

"I don't know, because no astronaut has ever not followed plans or orders," Colonel Sanderson said.

"But if you think about it, I guess Sutcliffe is right—we're really not astronauts," I said.

"It can't hurt to just talk to them about this, right?" Ashley asked.

"You can talk to them, but it doesn't mean they're going to change," the colonel replied.

"What if we tell them they don't have any choice but to listen?" I asked.

"Are you giving them an ultimatum?" Colonel Sanderson questioned.

"I don't know."

"They might respond by canceling our mission. Are you prepared for that to happen?"

I didn't know what to say.

"Once you bring it up, they may make the decision for you," the colonel said.

"You mean they might cancel the mission just because we want to talk about it?" Ashley asked.

"It could happen, but realistically, the only bargaining chip you have is to threaten to leave the program. Are you three prepared to put that option forward? Because once you put it out there, there might not be any way back."

Everybody looked at me. "I'm not sure of anything. At least, not yet. I want us to talk about things. Colonel, if you want to leave and not be part of this, I understand."

"I'm not going anywhere. This isn't just about the three of you, it's also about me going back into space. We're a team. I might be able to come up with a thing or two that could help."



Dr. Fernandez sat in the middle of a long table, directly in front of us. I started to count. There were ten of them. To her left was the assistant director, and on her right was Dr. Amos, who had spent so much time with Teal. Our mission commander, Lieutenant Colonel Ingram, was present, as were the different department heads.

The colonel, who wasn't allowed to be part of this, had told us that if they were going to turn us down, they were going to go "full-court press" and try to intimidate us. It looked like they *were* going to turn us down. I felt shaken and scared. After all, who was I, some kid, to tell the experts, the bosses of the whole space agency, what to do? I wondered if

they'd even considered our request.

Teal reached over and gave me a tap on the hand and a reassuring smile. She looked, as always, calm and controlled and unfazed, and her smile gave some of that to me.

"Good evening," Dr. Fernandez said. "I want to start by thanking you for putting forward your concerns about your need for additional training. We appreciate your desire to be as prepared as possible for your mission."

I waited for the "but" as she paused.

"And in response to your request, we will schedule in additional training time."

"You're canceling the media tour?" Ashley asked.

"Oh no, that's too important. We're going to arrange to fly you back on occasion to continue your training," she said.

"How often is 'on occasion'?" Teal asked.

"It's, um, undefined at this time, but we'll try for at least a few days."

"So, we'll only miss forty days of training, give or take a day," Teal said.

"It could be more, but overall, we've decided that the gains from additional training are insufficient to counteract the benefits that will be derived through the extended media tour."

"Those aren't benefits for us," I said.

"Excuse me?" Dr. Fernandez said. "We're talking about long-term benefit for the entire space program. You should be packed and prepared to leave on the tour by the end of tomorrow."

"No," I said.

"What?" Dr. Fernandez asked. She looked surprised.

"No, Dr. Fernandez. We've decided that we're not going on that tour."

She laughed, but it didn't look like she found this funny. "You have no choice but to follow your assignment."

"We do have a choice," Teal said. "You can't force us to go on that tour."

"Perhaps not, but we can ask you to leave the program."

I swallowed hard. The colonel had prepared us. It didn't make it any easier to hear it now, but at least we'd practiced our words.

"That is your decision to make," I said. "Just like it's our decision to leave the program if you won't listen to us."

"Do you really think we can be threatened?" Dr. Fernandez asked. Others at the table nodded in agreement.

"It's not meant as a threat," I said. "Any more than what you said to us was a threat."

Dr. Fernandez didn't answer. Instead she turned to the person to her left, exchanged a few words we couldn't hear, then did the same with the person on her right, Dr. Amos.

"You realize that we don't need all three of you. We could assign only two of you to the mission, and it could even be completed successfully with just one of you going into space." She paused. "Ashley, we haven't heard from you. Are you in agreement with what Houston and Teal are saying?"

I hadn't seen that one coming. They were trying to divide us.

I turned to look at Ashley. Why wasn't she answering?

“We’re all in agreement. We’ll go home rather than go on a media tour. We don’t wish to endanger the lives of other members of the mission. Wouldn’t you agree, Lieutenant Colonel Ingram?”

Wow, that was so direct. Lieutenant Colonel Ingram looked not just surprised but also confused. “Um, mission safety is always the top priority,” she finally stammered.

“Then you agree we need more training,” Ashley said.

Before she could answer, Dr. Fernandez jumped back in. “It’s apparent that none of you feel you are prepared for space. We’ll perhaps find other young candidates and train them to fill your spots on a future mission.”

“You don’t have time for that,” I said. “You need this program to go ahead as planned.”

“I think you’ve overestimated the importance of both yourselves and TAP,” Dr. Fernandez said.

“It’s not about us or TAP,” Teal said. “It’s about the Mars mission. You need us to be successful to get more support for going to Mars. You can’t afford to cancel this mission without risking the one that comes next.”

Colonel Sanderson was the one who had told us to play this card. Our mission was important, but not as important as the Mars mission. That was our trump card.

There was no immediate answer. No response. Dr. Fernandez didn’t look happy or comfortable, but I didn’t imagine any of us did either.

“So, we have an alternate plan, a compromise, that would allow more publicity but wouldn’t interfere with our training,” Teal said. “Would you be prepared to listen to our plan?”

“We’re all scientists,” Dr. Fernandez said. “We are always prepared to listen. I guess the big question is, are you three prepared for the consequences of what we decide?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Completely,” Teal said.

“All of us,” Ashley agreed. “After all, we are a team.”

Twenty-Nine

I took a deep breath. The sound reverberated through my helmet and my headset. In the background I could hear the technicians and Mission Control counting out systems, checking them off one by one, giving each a “go.”

My whole body was buzzing, as was the whole rocket. We were sitting over three hundred feet above the ground. As high as a thirty-story building. Underneath us was enough fuel to either launch us into space or blow us into so many microscopic pieces that no parts of our bodies would ever be—. I stopped myself. I couldn’t let my mind go there.

With each system given a go, we were a little bit closer to liftoff. I looked up at the countdown clock. It had just gone under the two-minute mark. In less than 120 seconds we’d have ignition and liftoff. And then, after clearing the tower, in under nine minutes we’d break free of Earth’s gravity, we’d be in a low-level orbit, traveling at seventeen thousand miles per hour, five miles every single *second*. We’d be in space. *I’d* be in space.

There was a tap on my gloved hand, and I startled and then looked over. Ashley was strapped in beside me. She smiled at me, and I smiled back. She was trying to be brave to support me, and I was trying to be brave to support her. I think we both knew that we were both terrified.

Below, on the ground in the observation bunker, Teal was among all the technicians and space-agency staff, watching and waiting. I knew my aunt and uncle and the Boo-Boos were seated right beside her, along with Ashley’s family. Teal wasn’t going into space with us, but she was part of the team. They’d be monitoring her vital signs and her body reactions and testing her on the ground the same way they’d be testing us in space. And while we were orbiting the planet, she’d be doing some pretty impressive traveling of her own.

Teal would be doing all the media things in support of us. She’d be traveling the globe, meeting people, being interviewed and promoting TAP and the missions that were to follow. Of course, we weren’t going to be completely free of that. Ashley and I would continue to do interviews from space. That was all part of the compromise that had got us more training.

A big part of that deal was that Teal had accepted that she was the one who would not be going into space. She was, after all, the very best one of us for dealing with the media. We’d all gone on tour for a week and then returned to our training, giving virtual interviews and meeting with journalists in the evenings when we weren’t in intensive training. We’d done the media they wanted, just in a different way, and now here we were, not fully trained but better trained.

The checklist continued—so many systems had to receive a go. I knew that even one failure in one system might mean the mission would have to be scrubbed—called off. I didn’t want anything to go wrong that would prevent liftoff. At least, most of me didn’t.

“T-minus sixty seconds and counting,” came the announcement. “Power is being transferred to internal computers.”

I felt panic starting to build. There was no way to stop this, no way out. I had to stay calm. I closed my eyes. I needed to find a peaceful place to go.

I thought about my family watching below, about saying goodbye to them over

breakfast this morning. The Boo-Boos fighting over the last piece of bacon, my uncle shaking my hand, my aunt hugging me. That was the last breakfast we'd share for something between a few weeks and six months. Or maybe the last one we'd ever share together.

Saying goodbye to them had been hard. Saying goodbye to Teal had been different. She'd kissed me. It was the kiss we hadn't had months earlier. She surprised me. And made me happy, and here I was, strapped to a gigantic rocket that was going to blast me into space, and I was thinking about that instead of what was happening all around me. Maybe she was my happy place.

"Onboard systems are all a go," came the voice. "We are at T-minus sixteen...fifteen...fourteen...thirteen... twelve...eleven...ten...nine...eight..."

It was happening. I felt the rocket start to vibrate even harder.

"Six...five...start ignition...two...one."

The whole rocket started to shake violently, and I had the sense we were moving, ever so slowly and—

"We have liftoff...we have liftoff !"

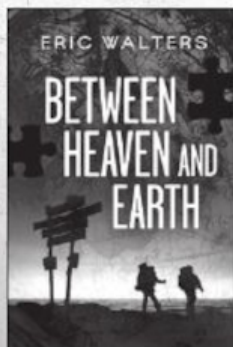
I opened my eyes. I wanted to see every second of it. No matter what.

Acknowledgments

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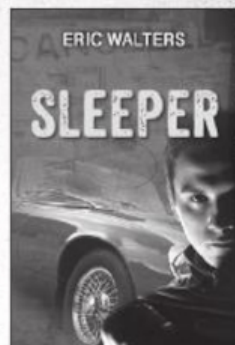
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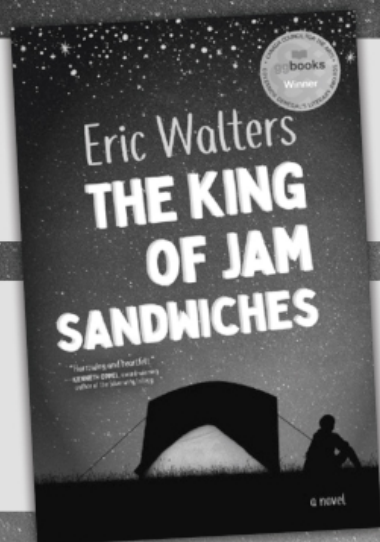
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